

WIKISTRAT EXPERT SURVEY

# How the War in Iran Is Shaping China's Strategic Calculus

April 2026



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Executive Summary	3
Top 10 Strategic Takeaways	4
Introduction	7
Methodology	8
Expert Profiles	10
Analysis	12
China's Internal Stability: Buffered, But Not Bulletproof	12
Short-Term Taiwan Risk (2026-2027): Near-Unanimous No	14
Long-Term Taiwan Risk (2028+): Low, but Scenario-Dependent	16
Chinese Reassessment of U.S. Power: Impressed and Anxious	18
Military Surprise and Tactical Lessons: A Comprehensive Intelligence Harvest	21
Strategic Implications: Patience, Preparation, and the Longer Game	23
Conclusion	25

# Executive Summary

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The war in Iran has emerged as the most significant test of U.S. military power since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and its reverberations reach well beyond the Middle East. For Beijing, the conflict represents a live intelligence feed, an economic stress test, and a geopolitical Rorschach test all at once.

To assess how China's leadership is processing these signals, Wikistrat surveyed ten of the world's leading experts on China, the PLA, and U.S.-China relations in early April 2026.

The consensus findings are both reassuring and sobering. On the key question for policymakers in Washington, Taipei, and Tokyo, the expert panel is nearly unanimous: the Iran war has not meaningfully raised the probability of a Chinese military move against Taiwan, either in the short term (2026-2027) or the long term (2028 onward). Nine of ten experts answered "No" to both questions. The single dissent on the short-term question came with significant caveats tied specifically to the Trump administration's shifting security posture.

Below that headline finding, however, the dynamics are more complex. The PLA is absorbing tactical lessons from U.S. and Israeli operations at a rapid pace, particularly around AI-enabled targeting, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR) integration, leadership decapitation, and the suppression of air defenses. The war has reinforced China's conviction that it must accelerate military modernization, protect its command structure, disperse assets, and develop stronger nuclear deterrence. China is not emboldened to fight; it is studying how to survive and prevail if it ever must.

On China's internal stability, the panel found that energy price pressures have been largely absorbed through strategic reserves, Russian supply diversification, a pivot to renewables, and state-controlled price mechanisms. The political impact has been minimal to date, though a protracted conflict raising global commodity prices could create cascading export-market pressures for an economy already under structural stress.

The Iran war has not upended Beijing's strategic patience on Taiwan, but it has sharpened its awareness of the cost of miscalculation. China is watching, learning, and building. That combination, over time, is what makes the long-term implications more important.

# Top 10 Strategic Takeaways

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1

## China is unlikely to strike Taiwan in the short or long term.

Nine of ten experts assessed no meaningful increase in near-term Taiwan attack risk. The PLA is mid-purge, lacks combat-ready leadership, and Beijing's calculus on Taiwan remains driven by internal dynamics, cross-strait politics, and U.S. deterrence, not opportunism triggered by Middle East events.

2

## PLA leadership purges are the most important near-term constraint on Chinese military action.

Multiple experts flagged the unprecedented scope of recent PLA purges as the dominant operational constraint. The CMC has been hollowed out to just two members including Xi. Rebuilding command confidence and trust will take years, not months.

3

## China is absorbing real tactical lessons from the Iran war at speed.

Across the board, experts agreed Beijing is studying AI-enabled ISR, precision targeting, leadership decapitation strikes, and multi-domain joint operations. The lessons are being fed into PLA modernization doctrine in near-real time. This represents active threat assessment rather than passive observation.

4

## U.S. military capabilities have impressed and unsettled Chinese planners in equal measure.

Chinese military analysts see both strength and vulnerability. The precision of U.S.-Israeli targeting, AI-ISR integration, and multi-domain execution were positively surprising. Iranian resistance, U.S. munitions depletion rates, and the limits of air power against asymmetric adversaries were negatively so.

5

**Beijing sees U.S. power as declining but still dominant, and therefore dangerous.**

Experts found a duality in Chinese elite opinion: the war confirms long-held "East rising, West declining" narratives, yet simultaneously demonstrates that U.S. power projection remains unmatched. China's response is not celebration but accelerated self-strengthening.

6

**Iran's resilience under attack has given China a useful data point on coercion limits.**

Several experts noted that Iran's ability to absorb leadership decapitation without regime collapse, and to sustain asymmetric resistance, reinforces Chinese confidence that a large, hardened state can survive U.S. strikes. This shapes PLA thinking on national resilience architecture.

7

**China is doubling down on energy diversification as a strategic imperative, not just an economic one.**

With both Venezuela and Iran targeted by U.S. operations, Beijing is treating energy diversification as a national security matter. Russian supply, renewables, EVs, and coal backup are all being accelerated. The war has made the vulnerability of fossil fuel dependency evident to Chinese planners.

8

**The war reduced Beijing's readiness for conflict with the U.S.**

Several experts concluded that watching the Iran campaign has made Chinese political and military leadership more cautious, not less. The cost, complexity, and uncertainty of fighting the U.S. military have been vividly demonstrated. The primary lesson is: avoid a direct confrontation.

**9**

**Long-term Taiwan risk depends more on Xi's ambition and U.S. political trajectory than on the Middle East.**

Experts consistently placed Iran in the background when modeling long-term Taiwan contingencies. What matters is: Xi's personal timeline, whether the KMT returns to power in Taiwan in 2028, the trajectory of U.S. deterrence credibility under and after the Trump era, and Chinese economic performance.

**10**

**Unpredictability has become China's primary fear about U.S. power, eclipsing concerns about U.S. strength.**

Multiple experts with direct access to Beijing officials noted that erratic U.S. decision-making under the Trump administration is generating deeper anxiety in China than any specific capability. An unpredictable hegemon is viewed as more dangerous than a predictable one, even a declining one.

# Introduction

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On February 28, 2026, U.S. and Israeli forces launched coordinated strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, air defense networks, and IRGC command infrastructure, marking the opening of what would become the most intense and technologically advanced air campaign since Operation Inherent Resolve.

For China, the war arrived at a particularly fraught moment. Beijing's economy was navigating persistent deflation, sluggish domestic consumption, and export headwinds. The People's Liberation Army was in the middle of its deepest leadership purge in decades, with the Central Military Commission thinned to just two members. Cross-strait relations were tense but static, with Taiwan's DPP government under Lai Ching-te holding firm and KMT leader Cheng Li-wun preparing for a planned visit to Beijing in April. And U.S.-China trade relations were in a state of managed hostility under a second Trump term.

Against that backdrop, the Iran conflict forced Beijing to do something it does with discipline and sophistication: observe, assess, and adapt. What is China learning from the war? How is it affecting Xi Jinping's calculations about Taiwan, about the United States, and about China's own military readiness? Does it change the risk of conflict in the Indo-Pacific? And how much of an economic burden is it imposing on a leadership already managing multiple domestic pressures?

The answers to these questions have direct implications for U.S. policy, for Taiwan's security calculus, for allied deterrence architecture in Asia, and for commodity markets exposed to Chinese demand shifts.

To examine these issues, Wikistrat commissioned a structured expert survey of ten of the world's leading analysts of China, the PLA, and Asian security. Their responses, collected in early April 2026, form the empirical core of this report.

The report addresses five analytical tracks: China's internal stability and economic exposure; near-term Taiwan attack risk; long-term Taiwan attack risk; Chinese reassessment of U.S. power; and tactical and strategic lessons Beijing is drawing from the campaign. Each section synthesizes expert views, surfaces points of consensus and disagreement, and draws analytical conclusions relevant to strategic planners and policymakers.

# Methodology

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Wikistrat designed this survey as a structured expert elicitation exercise, drawing on established protocols for geopolitical forecasting and strategic net assessment. The methodology combined closed-ended questions (Yes/No binary choices with follow-on explanation fields) and open-ended analytical prompts, producing both quantifiable consensus data and qualitative expert reasoning.

## Survey Design

The questionnaire covered six thematic areas: (1) China's internal political and economic stability under Iran war conditions; (2) short-term Taiwan attack risk (2026-2027); (3) long-term Taiwan attack risk (2028 onward); (4) Chinese reassessment of U.S. power and power projection; (5) the degree and direction of surprise among Chinese military planners; and (6) strategic and tactical lessons Beijing's political leadership is drawing from the campaign. Respondents were asked to assess probability and direction before providing extended analytical reasoning.

## Expert Selection

Respondents were selected based on three criteria: demonstrated expertise in Chinese foreign and security policy, the PLA, or U.S.-China relations; track record of public or classified analytical work; and institutional independence. The panel includes academics, think-tank fellows, former diplomats, and independent analysts. It spans perspectives from the United States, United Kingdom, India, and continental Europe, providing geographical and methodological diversity. All ten respondents completed the survey in full.

## Analytical Approach

Quantitative findings (Yes/No distributions) are reported as absolute counts (e.g., "9 of 10") rather than percentages, given the small panel size. Qualitative responses are analyzed thematically, with direct quotations used where they add precision or illustrative value. Where expert opinions diverge significantly, points of disagreement are explicitly noted rather than smoothed into false consensus. The report does not weight individual experts by seniority or institutional affiliation.

## **Limitations**

This survey reflects assessments made in early April 2026, approximately five weeks after the initial U.S.-Israeli strikes. The operational situation in Iran was still evolving, and several respondents noted that their assessments on specific questions, could shift depending on how the conflict developed. This report should be read as a snapshot of leading expert thinking at a specific point in the conflict's trajectory, not as a definitive long-range forecast.

# Expert Profiles

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The survey drew on ten recognized authorities in Chinese strategic affairs, PLA modernization, and Asian security dynamics.

**Dr. Alessandro Arduino** | Associate Fellow

**Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)**

*Author of China's Private Army and a leading authority on Chinese private security and Belt and Road Initiative security implications, advising NATO, the EU, UNDP, and the EBRD. Affiliate lecturer at King's College London's Lau China Institute and Knight of the Order of the Star of Italy.*

**Dr. Kerry Brown** | Director of the Lau China Institute

**King's College London**

*Professor of Chinese Studies and author of nearly 20 books on modern Chinese politics. Former British diplomat with postings in Beijing, and previously Head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House. Directed the European Commission's China policy advisory network (ECRAN) from 2011 to 2014.*

**Eric Chan** | Senior Non-Resident Fellow

**Global Taiwan Institute**

*China military affairs and Taiwan security specialist with a career spanning the Pentagon, where he serves as Senior Airpower Strategist for the U.S. Air Force. Former China and Korea Country Director at the Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs, with deep expertise in PLA doctrine, Chinese influence operations, and the East Asian strategic balance.*

**Dr. Andrea Ghiselli** | Director of the MA Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Programme

**University of Exeter**

*China foreign policy and security specialist with nine years on faculty at Fudan University. Currently heading research for the ChinaMed Project at the University of Exeter.*

**Bonnie Glaser** | Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program

**German Marshall Fund**

*One of Washington's foremost China and Taiwan policy voices with over three decades at the intersection of Asia-Pacific geopolitics and U.S. strategy. Co-author of US-Taiwan Relations: Will China's Challenge Lead to a Crisis and former director of the China Power Project at CSIS.*

**Dr. Avinash Godbole** | *Professor of China's Foreign Policy and Associate Academic Dean*  
**O.P. Jindal Global University**

*India-China relations and Indo-Pacific security specialist, former Fox Fellow at Yale's Macmillan Center and visiting faculty at the Naval War College, Goa, with extensive involvement in India-China Track 1.5 and Track 2 diplomacy.*

**Dr. Kang Liu** | *Director of the Duke Program of Research on China*  
**Duke University**

*Professor of Chinese Studies and elected member of Academia Europaea since 2015. Author of twelve books spanning Chinese media and culture, globalization, Marxism, and contemporary Chinese politics, with scholarship published widely in both English and Chinese.*

**Dr. Yawei Liu** | *Senior Advisor on China*  
**The Carter Center**

*U.S.-China relations and Chinese grassroots democracy expert with over 25 years at the Carter Center, where he directs China Focus and edits the U.S.-China Perception Monitor. Adjunct professor at Emory University, member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and author of multiple book series on Chinese political development and village elections.*

**Dr. Minxin Pei** | *Editor*  
**China Leadership Monitor**

*A defining voice in the study of Chinese authoritarianism, with five books published by Harvard University Press on regime decay, surveillance, and the limits of reform. Inaugural Library of Congress Chair on U.S.-China Relations and former director of the China Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Harvard Ph.D., previously on faculty at Princeton.*

**Dr. Zhiqun Zhu** | *Director of the China Institute*  
**Bucknell University**

*Professor of Political Science and International Relations and author or editor of 16 books on Chinese foreign policy and East Asian security. Former MacArthur Chair Professor in East Asian politics, Fulbright Scholar to Australia, and editor-in-chief of China and the World. Previously served as Senior Assistant to Consul at the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai.*

# Analysis

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## China's Internal Stability: Buffered, But Not Bulletproof

The near-universal expert assessment is that China's domestic stability has not been meaningfully threatened by the Iran war, at least not yet. The government moved quickly to cushion the economic impact, keeping retail energy prices stable through a combination of strategic petroleum reserve drawdowns, increased Russian crude imports, and state-controlled pricing that absorbed cost increases at the refinery level.

*"China is suffering deflation. Prices are low, wages are low, and on a recent visit in late March 2026, food prices are cheap. The rise in energy costs is something that China can absorb, at least in the short term."*

**Dr. Kerry Brown** | Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London

The situation is more nuanced. China's economy depends on exports for job creation and wealth generation, and several expert respondents highlighted the indirect transmission mechanisms that could amplify the war's economic impact over time. Rising global insurance and shipping costs, weaker demand in European and Middle Eastern export markets, and sector-specific disruptions (particularly teapot refineries, which lack the scale to hedge against energy price volatility) are all live pressure points.

*"The greater danger for China is not a spike in inflation, but a cascading squeeze: higher energy, shipping, and insurance costs eating into the competitiveness of Chinese exports, compounded by weakening global demand if inflation drags on growth elsewhere."*

**Dr. Alessandro Arduino** | Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

China's energy insulation rests on several structural pillars that respondents identified consistently: large strategic reserves that provide a multi-month buffer; a deepening Russian oil supply relationship that has accelerated since 2022; a rapidly expanding domestic renewables and EV fleet that reduces petroleum dependency at the margin; coal-fired power

capacity that can absorb some of the energy burden; and government-administered pricing that protects consumers from spot market volatility.

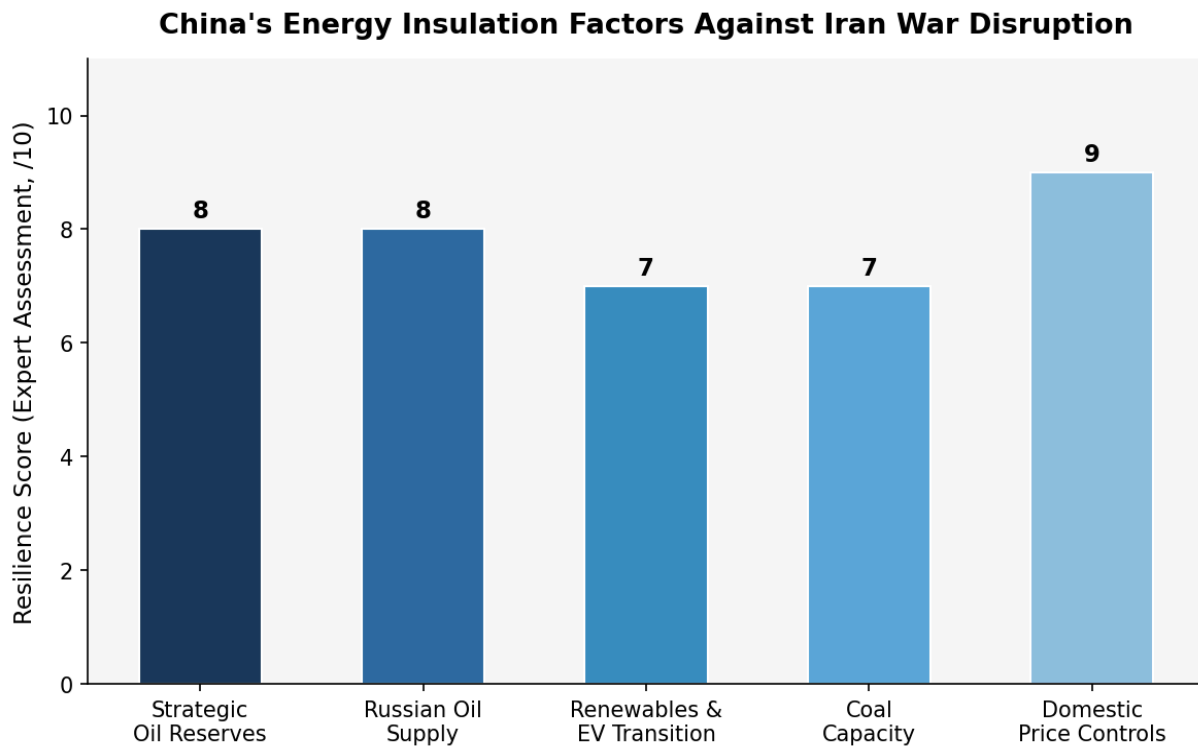


Figure 1: China's Energy Insulation Factors Against Iran War Disruption (Expert Assessment)

The consensus caveat is time. If the Iran conflict becomes a multi-year affair with sustained disruption to the Strait of Hormuz and persistently elevated energy prices, the cumulative drag on China's already-sluggish economy could generate political pressures that are harder to absorb. No expert assessed that threshold as having been crossed yet, but several flagged it as the primary domestic risk vector to watch.

## Short-Term Taiwan Risk (2026-2027): Near-Unanimous No

On the question most directly relevant to Indo-Pacific security, nine of ten experts assessed that the Iran war has not meaningfully increased the risk of a Chinese military action against Taiwan in the 2026-2027 window.

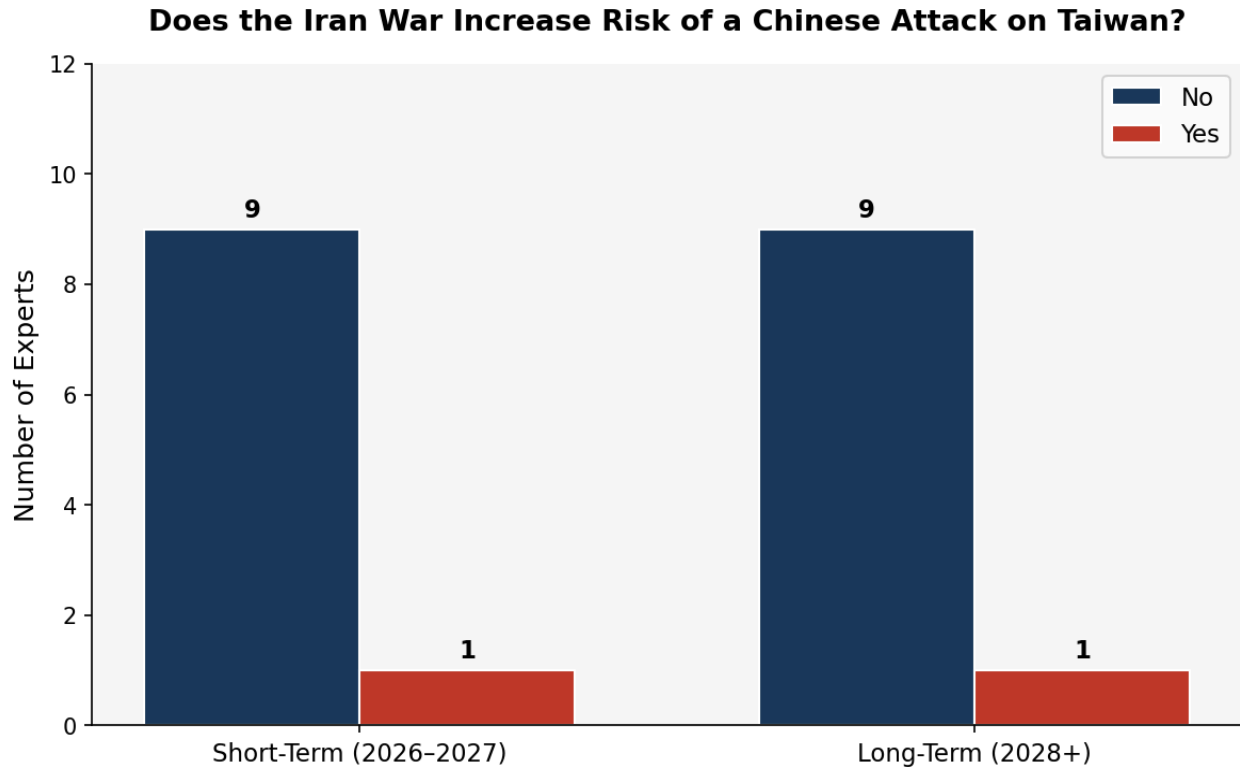


Figure 2: Expert Assessment — Does the Iran War Increase Risk of a Chinese Attack on Taiwan?

The reasoning behind this near-unanimous view points to several interlocking factors. The first and most consistently cited is the PLA's leadership crisis. The latest round of military purges has been unprecedented in scope, hitting the operational core of PLA cadres. Multiple experts noted that the CMC now consists of only two members including Xi, that Xi has explicitly signaled distrust of his military by cleaning house, and that operational readiness has almost certainly been degraded.

*"The PLA has just been subjected to the widest-ranging leadership purges to date, and is in no shape to opportunistically take advantage of the U.S. being distracted in Iran. Rebuilding both the leadership and Xi's trust in leadership competency will take time."*

**Eric Chan** | Senior Non-Resident Fellow, Global Taiwan Institute

*"Recent purges at senior levels of the PLA suggest that Xi has little confidence in his military and is cleaning house. In the short term, operational readiness will be affected."*

**Bonnie Glaser** | Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program, German Marshall Fund

The second factor is strategic cost-benefit calculus. Several respondents emphasized that the potential costs of a failed Taiwan operation are existential for the CCP. If a PLA attack on Taiwan fails to achieve Beijing's political objectives, Xi Jinping's position and CCP legitimacy could be in question. No leadership in that position takes on that level of risk while simultaneously managing a degraded military command.

Third, Beijing's preferred long game on Taiwan involves political rather than military options. Xi Jinping's planned meeting with KMT Chair Cheng Li-wun in April 2026, with a KMT leadership more inclined toward dialogue with the mainland than the DPP, offers China a viable political pathway that reduces the urgency of military action.

The single dissent came from Avinash Godbole, who argued that Trump administration ambiguity about U.S. security commitments might lead Beijing to calculate that a window of reduced American attention was opening. His argument rested on a specific reading of Trump's willingness to extend the commitments his predecessor made to Taiwan, a point others acknowledged as uncertain but did not treat as consequential in the near term.

## Long-Term Taiwan Risk (2028+): Low, but Scenario-Dependent

Looking beyond 2028, the outlook is only marginally more uncertain. Nine of ten experts continued to assess that the Iran war does not materially increase the long-term risk of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The single dissent shifted: Minxin Pei reasoned that a protracted U.S. engagement in Iran lasting ten or more years could give China meaningfully greater confidence and risk appetite, though he stopped short of predicting an outright invasion.

*"If the U.S. gets bogged down in Iran over an extended period — ten years — then China will gain more confidence and can afford to take more risks. Under this scenario, we can see more aggressive Chinese behavior, but it may still fall short of a direct attack that triggers a full-blown war."*

**Dr. Minxin Pei** | Editor, China Leadership Monitor

The dominant expert frame for assessing long-term Taiwan risk pointed to factors that have nothing to do with Iran: Xi's personal timeline and political psychology; the 2028 Taiwan presidential election and the possibility of KMT victory; China's economic performance and its domestic political legitimacy; and the trajectory of U.S. deterrence credibility and alliance architecture in Asia after the Trump era.

*"China has its own internal dynamics and calculations. Unless the war on Iran causes a significant deterioration of U.S. capabilities, China is more likely observing internal political conditions in Taiwan itself."*

**Dr. Kerry Brown** | Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London

Eric Chan offered a useful scenario framework: a quick, decisive U.S.-Israeli victory deters Chinese adventurism; a prolonged attritional war is roughly neutral, weighted against U.S. precision munition consumption rates; and a U.S.-Israeli defeat or political debacle, one that consolidates the Iranian regime and fractures U.S.-European relations, would encourage Chinese risk-taking. Most respondents placed the current trajectory in the second scenario, with the third as a low-probability tail risk worth monitoring.

Several experts made the point that even as the power gap between China and the United States narrows, it is only one part of the equation. Dynamics within the Chinese leadership and economy that cannot currently be predicted will play a more decisive role than any military balance sheet. That is both a caution against overconfidence in deterrence and a caution against catastrophism about inevitable conflict.

## Chinese Reassessment of U.S. Power: Impressed and Anxious

On whether the Iran war has changed China's perception of U.S. power, the expert panel split evenly: five assessed yes, five assessed no or minimal change. This is the survey's most genuinely contested finding, and the disagreement is analytically substantive rather than semantic.

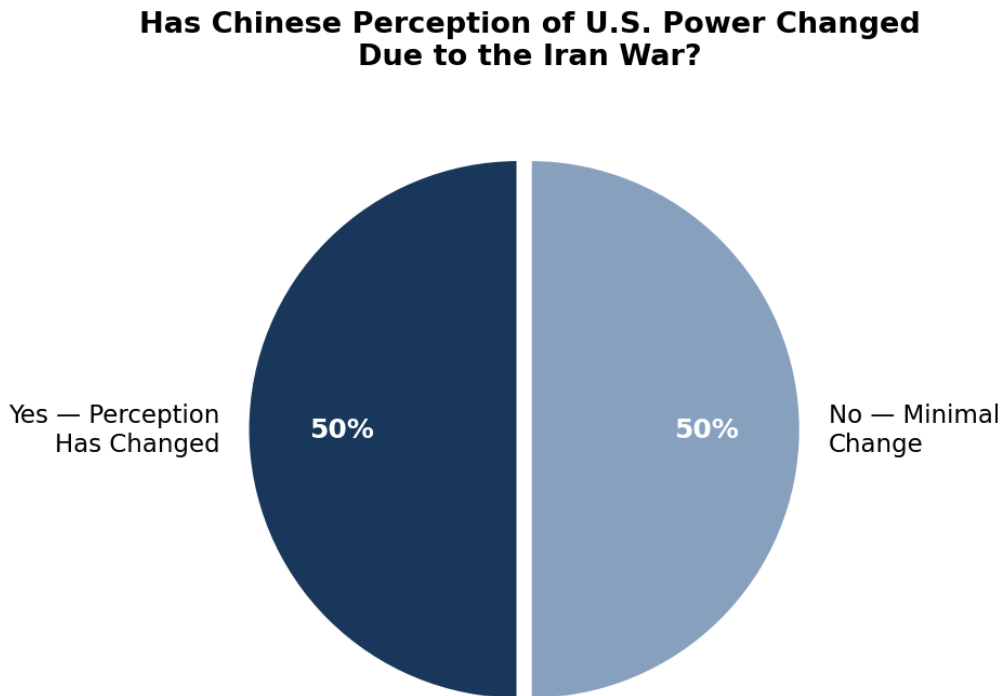


Figure 3: Has Chinese Perception of U.S. Power Changed Due to the Iran War? (Expert Assessment)

Those who assessed change emphasized that the war has updated specific components of the Chinese threat calculus, particularly the precision and scale of U.S. targeting capabilities, the effectiveness of AI-ISR integration, and the demonstration of reliable intelligence penetration at the highest levels of an adversary state. For a Chinese leadership that had watched Iraq and Afghanistan and concluded that U.S. power was overextended and politically fragile, the Iran campaign provided a corrective data point.

*"The PLA suffered a seismic shock after the Desert Storm campaign against Iraq in the early 1990s. The month-long campaign against Iran has once again convinced Chinese leaders that the U.S. can project power globally, and whether it intervenes in the Taiwan Strait is not a military decision but a political one."*

**Dr. Yawei Liu** | Senior Advisor on China, The Carter Center

Those who assessed minimal change made a different argument: serious Chinese strategic analysts have never denied U.S. military superiority, and the Iran war adds data without changing the fundamental judgment. In this reading, the real update is not about capability but about predictability.

*"There are plenty in Beijing who are bewildered by the signs of lack of strategic clarity in the U.S., and by the very confusing and mixed messages coming from Trump and other key officials."*

**Dr. Kerry Brown** | Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London

*"U.S. multi-domain operations are a reference point. China's military has spent decades studying them, stress-testing responses, and quietly building a hybrid warfare doctrine designed for precisely this kind of confrontation. This is not 1991."*

**Dr. Alessandro Arduino** | Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

*"Some experts believe that the U.S. is in a precipitous decline, others believe that U.S. decline is taking place and is irreversible, but may not be linear; there could be periods of a surge in U.S. power; and the Iran war has demonstrated that the U.S. is still very powerful militarily."*

**Bonnie Glaser** | Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program, German Marshall Fund

Bonnie Glaser captured the duality that several experts identified: China simultaneously sees evidence that U.S. hegemony is weakening and that, as it weakens, Washington may lash out

more aggressively to preserve its position. That combination, a declining but still powerful hegemon behaving erratically, is the scenario that genuinely unsettles Beijing.

The debate within China on U.S. power is not monolithic. Kang Liu offered a useful taxonomy: Xi's inner circle holds one view; Chinese strategic experts another; state-controlled media shapes a third; and public opinion, heavily influenced by those media, generates a fourth. The Iran war is being processed through all four simultaneously, often with contradictory results. The signal that cuts across all four, however, is that the U.S. is still, for now, taking the lead in reshaping the global order.

## Military Surprise and Tactical Lessons: A Comprehensive Intelligence Harvest

Perhaps the most analytically dense section of the survey concerns what the PLA is learning from the Iran campaign and how surprised Chinese military planners were by what they saw. Here the expert consensus is striking: China has been paying extremely close attention, and the lessons are feeding directly into PLA modernization priorities.

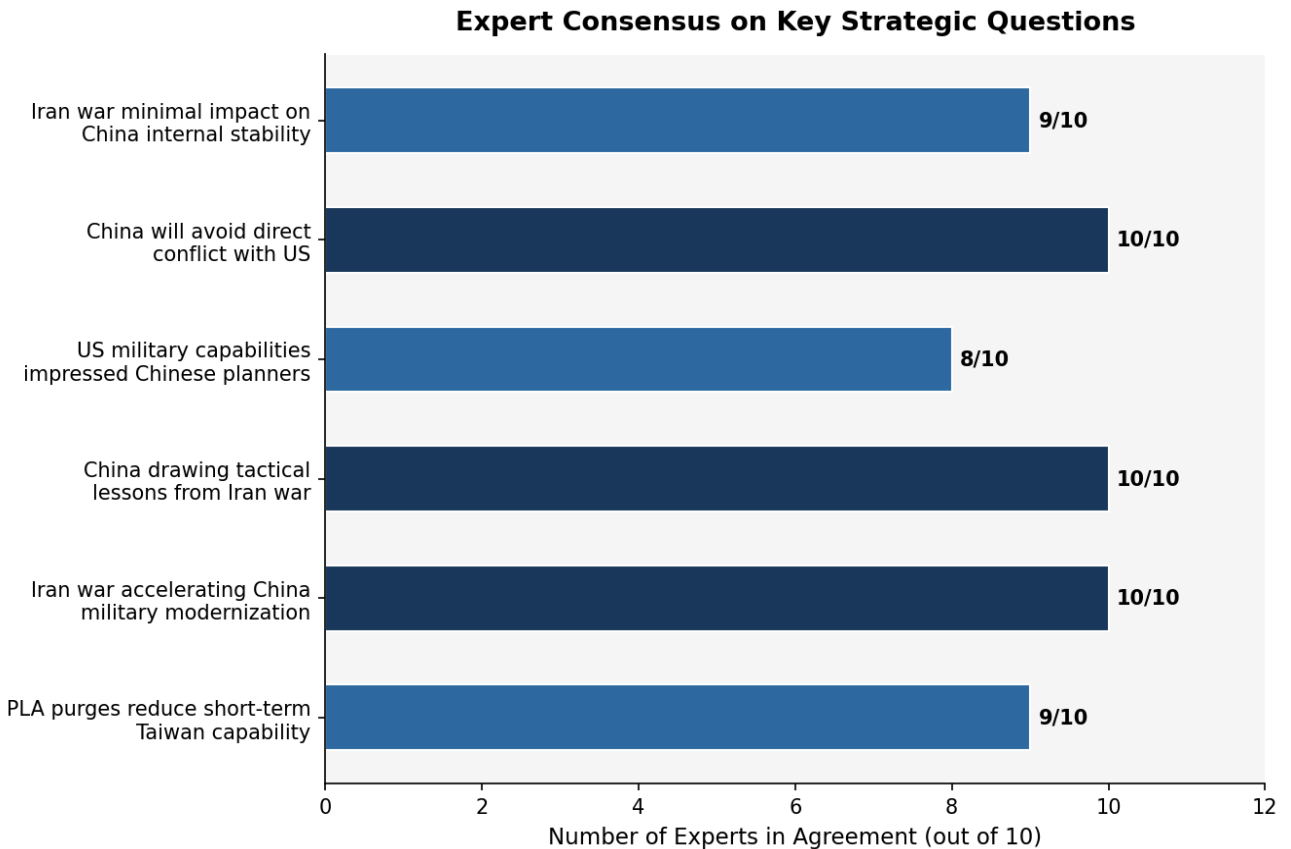


Figure 4: Expert Consensus on Key Strategic Questions (Proportion of Panel in Agreement)

Several specific surprises were identified across the expert panel. On the positive side (from a U.S.-Israeli perspective), the precision and speed of AI-enabled targeting, the success of intelligence penetration that enabled leadership decapitation, the seamlessness of joint operations between U.S. and Israeli forces, and the effectiveness of ISR-strike integration in real time all exceeded what Chinese planners had publicly anticipated.

*"I assume they are surprised by the nearly perfect coordination of different branches of the U.S. military; the seamless cooperation between the U.S. and Israel; the successful use of AI in generating battlefield decisions; and the quickness of the U.S. military-industrial complex in adopting new warfighting tactics and manufacturing cheap autonomous weapons."*

**Dr. Yawei Liu** | Senior Advisor on China, The Carter Center

On the negative side (from a U.S. perspective, and useful to Beijing), Iranian air defense and drone capabilities proved more resilient than expected; U.S. munitions stockpiles were drawn down at a rate that creates a multi-month replenishment gap; U.S. allies were largely unwilling to join the campaign; and Iran's government did not collapse despite severe leadership decapitation strikes, demonstrating the limits of coercion against a large, ideologically hardened state.

*"Iran has been able to block maritime traffic through the Strait, which likely reaffirms Chinese beliefs that they can effectively block traffic into and out of Taiwan's main ports. Iran has absorbed leadership decapitation strikes without a collapse of its government — this reinforces the PLA's assessment that it is difficult to coerce a large country through air strikes."*

**Bonnie Glaser** | Managing Director of the Indo-Pacific Program, German Marshall Fund

Both Venezuela and Iran delivered uncomfortable lessons about the performance of Chinese-supplied military equipment. Alessandro Arduino noted that U.S. electronic warfare and cyber operations against command-and-control networks performed well beyond what either country, or their Chinese equipment suppliers, had anticipated. The failures were not marginal, and the PLA will be studying them carefully.

The tactical learning agenda that respondents identified for Beijing includes: accelerating AI-enabled warfare development; enhancing counterintelligence and protecting command structures; dispersing assets to reduce vulnerability to precision strikes; hardening critical infrastructure; developing stronger nuclear deterrence to prevent U.S. even considering direct conflict with China; and studying Iranian disinformation and influence operations as a template for weakening democratic domestic consensus.

## Strategic Implications: Patience, Preparation, and the Longer Game

Across the survey, a coherent picture of China's strategic response to the Iran war emerges: not provocation, but preparation. Beijing is using the conflict as a live training exercise for its own strategic planning, an accelerant for military and technological modernization, and a data point for calibrating the risk profile of any future confrontation with the United States.

*"A primary lesson is that they will continue, perhaps speed up, China's military modernization. The purpose is not to engage in a war with the United States, but rather to make the U.S. think twice if it will still intervene in a future Taiwan Strait conflict when China's military power catches up."*

**Dr. Zhiqun Zhu** | Director of the China Institute, Bucknell University

The China that emerges from this survey is one that is not emboldened toward near-term military adventurism, but that is absolutely, systematically, and urgently building toward a future in which U.S. military dominance may no longer be the decisive factor in a Taiwan contingency. The window it is working toward is not 2027, as some have feared; it is something further out, when the power balance may have shifted enough to change the political calculus.

Several respondents offered important caveats to this trajectory. First, as Minxin Pei noted, China's domestic challenges, a slowing economy, a real estate overhang, demographic headwinds, and rising youth unemployment, are internal constraints that the Iran war does not resolve and could exacerbate. Second, the PLA's leadership crisis is not easily or quickly fixed. Trust, once broken in authoritarian systems, takes time to rebuild, and Xi's willingness to expose and prosecute corruption in the military is itself a symptom of deep institutional weakness.

Third, the Taiwan question is not solely in Beijing's hands. A KMT return to power in Taiwan in 2028 would create a diplomatic opening that reduces the pressure on Xi to act militarily, while genuinely reducing the political justification for it. China is fully aware of this possibility and is cultivating it. Finally, the post-Trump trajectory of U.S. foreign policy matters enormously: a return to active alliance management and credible deterrence commitments after 2028 would reset the strategic environment in ways that are difficult to predict from the current vantage point.

*"China will therefore continue to be patient, but has to now seriously think of a world order in which the U.S., willingly or unwillingly, is neither able nor willing to play the role it has played since the end of World War II as the provider of security guarantees for a key network of allies."*

**Dr. Kerry Brown** | Director of the Lau China Institute, King's College London

# Conclusion

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The Iran war has not triggered a shift in China's strategic posture toward Taiwan. It has not emboldened the PLA, not destabilized China's domestic politics, and not fundamentally altered Beijing's long-standing preference for strategic patience over military adventurism. On those headline questions, the expert panel's near-unanimity is a meaningful signal that should temper some of the more alarmist analyses circulating in policy circles.

But the subtler story this report tells is more consequential in the medium and long term. China is running one of the most sophisticated intelligence-collection and lesson-learning operations in the world right now, and the subject is the United States military at war. What it is learning, it is applying. The PLA that will exist in 2030 or 2035 will be shaped in part by what Chinese analysts are reading, debating, and feeding into doctrine today. The acceleration of AI-enabled warfare, the protection of command structures, the dispersal of assets, the hardening of critical infrastructure, and the development of a stronger nuclear deterrent are all being driven in part by what the Iran campaign has taught.

The near-term reassurance and the long-term concern coexist, and that is the analytically honest takeaway. China is not moving this year, or likely for several years. But it is moving. The real strategic challenge for the United States and its allies is not to prevent a Chinese attack in 2026; it is to ensure that the military balance and deterrence architecture that prevented one in 2026 still holds a decade from now, when China's military modernization program has had more time to close the gap.

That requires sustained investment, credible alliance commitments, and the kind of long-range strategic planning that is difficult to sustain through the political cycles of democratic systems. The Iran war is a reminder of how demanding that challenge is, and of how carefully China is watching every move.