

China has long maintained that it does not supply arms to any party at war – a central tenet of its “**noninterference**” **foreign policy**. But in recent years, Beijing has repeatedly faced accusations of doing the opposite: **providing direct military assistance to nations** engaged in conflict, while publicly denying doing so and even adopting a position of diplomatic neutrality.

That has seemingly been the case for two of China's closest allies: **Russia** in its war against Ukraine and **Pakistan** during its recent armed standoff with India in May.

Now, Beijing is facing scrutiny over alleged **military links to Iran** – a country engaged in a long-running shadow conflict with Israel that recently tipped into a short-lived hot war.

After the ceasefire that followed the 12-day war in the Middle East, **China reportedly supplied** batteries for surface-to-air missiles to Iran in exchange for oil. Such parts are a critical military need for Tehran after its air defense network was severely damaged by Israeli missiles.

The Chinese Embassy in Israel **denied the reports**, stating that China firmly opposes the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and does not export arms to countries at war. But China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yet to issue an official statement on the alleged transfer.

As an expert specializing in China's grand strategy, I think it is highly possible that China would offer Iran military support while denying it publicly. Such **plausible deniability** would allow Beijing to assert military influence and showcase some of its hardware, while deflecting international criticism and preserving diplomatic flexibility.

But the tactic works only so far. As indirect evidence accumulates, as many suggest it is, such covert action may gradually develop into an open secret – leading to what scholars term “**implausible deniability**,” where denial is no longer credible even if it is still officially

maintained.

China's support for Russia's war

Although Beijing has consistently **said it is neutral** in the Russia-Ukraine war that broke out in 2022, China has, in practice, quietly supported Russia. In part, that is because China shares the same strategic goal of challenging the Western-led international order.

Recently, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi **reportedly told** European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas that Beijing cannot afford to see Russia lose the war in Ukraine. He was said to have warned that a Russian defeat would likely bring the full force of U.S. strategic pressure to bear on China.

From Beijing's perspective, Moscow plays a vital role in keeping the West preoccupied, offering China valuable strategic breathing room by diverting American attention and resources away from the Asia-Pacific region.

Beyond deepening trade relations that have become **a lifeline for Moscow's economy** under Western sanctions, China has **reportedly supplied** Russia with large quantities of dual-use goods – goods that can be used for civilian and military purposes – to enhance both Moscow's offensive and defensive capabilities, as well as to boost China's military-industrial production. Beijing has also allegedly provided **satellite imagery** to assist Russia on the battlefield.

While the **U.S.** and **Europe** have repeatedly tried to call out China for aiding Russia militarily, Beijing has **consistently denied** such claims.

Most recently, on April 18, 2025, **Ukraine formally accused** China of directly supporting Russia and slapped sanctions on three Chinese-based firms that Kyiv said was involved in weapons

production for the Russian war effort.

In what has become a common refrain, China's **Foreign Ministry rejected** the Ukrainian accusation, reaffirming that China has never provided lethal weapons to any party in the conflict and reiterating its official stance of promoting a ceasefire and peace negotiations.

China's quiet backing of Pakistan

Beijing has long presented itself as a **neutral party** in the India-Pakistan conflict, too, and has called for restraint on both sides and urged peaceful dialogue.

But in practice, **China is allied with Pakistan**. And the direct military support it has provided to Lahore appears driven by **China's desire** to curb India's regional influence, counterbalance the growing U.S.-India strategic partnership and protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a massive bilateral infrastructure project.

In the **latest flare-up** between India and Pakistan in May, Pakistan deployed Chinese-made J-10C fighter jets in combat for the first time, reportedly downing five Indian aircraft.

Pakistan's air defense **relied heavily** on Chinese equipment during the short conflict, deploying Chinese-made surface-to-air missile systems, air-to-air missiles, advanced radar systems and drones for reconnaissance and strike operations. Overall, **more than 80%** of Pakistan's military imports have come from China in the past five years.

In what would be a far more stark example of military support if proven true, the **deputy chief of India's army** alleged that China had provided Pakistan with real-time intelligence on Indian troop movements during the conflict.

When asked to respond, a [spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) said they had no knowledge of the matter. They reaffirmed that China's ties with Pakistan are not directed against any third party and reiterated Beijing's long-standing position in favor of a peaceful resolution to any India-Pakistan dispute.

Extending 'deniability' to Iran?

Like with Russia and Pakistan, Iran has increasingly been seen as a partner to China.

In 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year, US\$400 billion [comprehensive cooperation agreement](#) that covered trade, energy and security, signaling the depth of their strategic relationship.

The accord was indicative of the strategic value Beijing places on Iran. From Beijing's perspective, Tehran presents a counterbalance to the influence of the U.S. and its allies – especially Israel and Saudi Arabia – in the region and helps divert Western resources and attention away from China.

But recently, Tehran's position in the region has become far weaker. Not only has its air defense infrastructure [suffered badly](#) in the confrontations with Israel, but its [regional proxies and allies](#) – Hamas, Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria – have either been devastated by Israel or collapsed altogether.

Under these circumstances, it is strategically compelling for Beijing to provide support to Tehran in order to maintain regime stability.

Indeed, Beijing has frequently [circumvented](#) sanctions on Iranian energy, with [an estimated 90%](#) of Iran's oil exports still going to China.

Although Beijing did not extend any **substantive support** to Iran during the 12-day war, reports have abounded since that Iran is looking to China as an alternative supplier of its defense needs. The thinking here is that Russia, Tehran's traditional military partner, is **no longer able to provide sufficient, quality defense equipment** to Iran. Some influential social media posters in China have gone as far as **advocating for direct military sales** by Beijing.

If China does do this, I believe it is likely to follow the same playbook it has used elsewhere by denying involvement publicly while covertly providing assistance.

Doing so allows China to maintain diplomatic ties with Iran's regional rivals, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously benefiting from a turbulent Middle East that distracts Washington and grants Beijing strategic breathing room.

China's use of plausible deniability reflects a broader strategic ambition. Namely, it wants to assert influence in key regional conflicts without triggering open backlash. By quietly supporting partners while maintaining a facade of neutrality, Beijing aims to undermine Western dominance, stretch U.S. strategic focus and secure its own interests – and all while avoiding the risks and responsibilities of open military alignment.