

# China Bulletin

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## China Condemns Attacks on Iran but Refrains from Substantive Support

**China is taking a cautious approach to the conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran. Its support for Iran is largely rhetorical, but it has substantial interests in Middle East stability.**

- China immediately condemned the June 22 U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, joining Russia and Pakistan in proposing a resolution for a complete Middle East ceasefire at the UN Security Council meeting.<sup>1</sup> While China has a strong interest in the Iranian government maintaining power, most analysts argue China is unlikely to provide substantial military support to Iran in the short term.<sup>2</sup>
- China likely perceives it will benefit from the United States getting bogged down in another Middle East conflict that distracts attention and resources from the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, most analysts argue that China benefits more from stability in the Middle East and wants to prevent disruption to its discounted oil from Iran and trade and technology relationships across the region.<sup>4</sup>
- China has deepened its relationship with Iran in recent years, signing a strategic partnership in 2021, contemplating \$400 billion in investment and backing the country diplomatically and economically.<sup>5</sup> In defiance of sanctions, China has been purchasing around 90 percent of Iran’s exported oil at heavily discounted rates in return for investment in other sectors of Iran’s economy.<sup>6</sup>
- China’s relationship with Iran is nuanced, however, as purchases from Iran equate to only 10–15 percent of China’s oil imports and other Middle Eastern countries account for roughly 40 percent of such imports.<sup>7</sup> China has also deepened its relationship with numerous Arab countries in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative, investing in infrastructure and assorted technology projects.<sup>8</sup> When asked about U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s call for China to pressure Iran not to close the Strait of Hormuz, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson obliquely replied that China would “continue playing a constructive role to promote de-escalation.”<sup>9</sup>

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## China-Linked Scam Centers in Southeast Asia Increasingly Target Americans

**Chinese transnational criminal organizations operate industrial-scale scam centers across Southeast Asia that steal billions of dollars annually from Americans.**

- Scam centers operated primarily by Chinese crime syndicates in Southeast Asia generate tens of billions of dollars annually while exploiting forced laborers under conditions observers have likened to modern slavery.<sup>10</sup> According to conservative estimates, Americans lost at least \$5 billion to such scams in 2024.<sup>11</sup>
- Beijing has selectively cracked down on scam centers that target Chinese victims, leading Chinese criminal organizations to conclude that they can make greater profits with lower risk by targeting Americans instead.<sup>12</sup> While China reported a 30 percent decrease in losses to online scams in 2024, the United States witnessed a 40 percent increase in losses during the same period.<sup>13</sup>
- Scam centers operated by Chinese transnational criminal organizations have spread corruption and provided a pretext for China to expand its security presence in Southeast Asia, including by pressuring U.S. allies such as Thailand to allow Chinese security personnel to operate inside its territory.<sup>14</sup>

## Chinese “Zero-Mileage” Used Car Exports Distort GDP and Sales Figures

**Local governments and automakers use “zero-mileage” used car scheme to inflate their numbers; exporters capture subsidies for new cars and dump excess supply abroad as used.**

- Reporting from Reuters found that over 20 local governments in China encouraged the practice of selling “zero-mileage” used cars through fast-tracking licenses and tax rebates and support for exporters.<sup>15</sup> The practice consists of exporters buying newly minted cars—often claiming consumption subsidies—and licensing the car in China, then immediately marking the undriven car as “used” to be sold abroad.<sup>16</sup> This allows car companies locked in price wars to benefit from tallying sales, exporters to sidestep foreign trade barriers and earn a hefty profit margin after counting subsidies, and local governments to count both the purchase and export toward gross domestic product (GDP) targets.<sup>17</sup>
- The scheme led used car exports to surge 45 percent in 2024 as Chinese automakers looked for alternatives to China’s oversaturated electric vehicle (EV) market.<sup>18</sup> One industry group estimates that 90 percent of the 436,000 used private and commercial vehicles exported by China last year were actually new “zero-mileage” vehicles.<sup>19</sup> China exported 6.41 million total vehicles in 2024.<sup>20</sup>
- Reuters coverage comes as China faces international backlash for exporting excess supply to global markets and demonstrates how perverse incentives perpetuate market distortions in China’s economy. As China’s government looks to consolidate the EV industry, firms view government perception of sales as more important to their survival than actual sales.<sup>21</sup>

## One-Off Subsidies Raise Retail Sales while Consumer Confidence Remains Low

**Subsidized trade-ins drove retail sales in China to beat forecasts in May, but low consumer confidence lingers, suggesting the boost from stimulus may be short lived.**

- Retail sales grew 6.4 percent year-over-year in May, the fastest pace since December 2023.<sup>22</sup> The jump was largely driven by the State Council’s “old-for-new” trade-in program, which gives consumer subsidies for purchases of certain “durable goods.” Sales of eligible home appliances were up 53 percent, while mobile phones increased 33 percent.<sup>23</sup> Surveys thus far in 2025 suggest consumer confidence remains at its lowest levels in decades, extending a three-year trough that began in April 2022.<sup>24</sup>
- Several provinces paused subsidy voucher disbursements after burning through funds earmarked for the popular program.<sup>25</sup> China’s central government has disbursed 162 billion renminbi (RMB) (\$22.5 billion) of the RMB 300 billion (\$41.7 billion) allocated under the program, with the remainder expected to be made available in the second half of the year.<sup>26</sup>
- Spending in May this year was also likely higher due to an extra holiday on the Chinese calendar and an extended 618 e-commerce sales event, which has evolved from one day of shopping sales on June 18 (comparable to “Amazon Prime” day) to a month-long affair, with most major Chinese retailers now offering deals.<sup>27</sup> Chinese e-commerce platforms reported that combined gross merchandise value totaled \$119 billion between May 13 and June 18, a 15.2 percent increase from last year’s shorter 618 festival.<sup>28</sup>

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## China's New National Security White Paper Aims to Present China as a Responsible World Power and Justify the Chinese Communist Party's Repressive Rule at Home

**Not much new: China aims to exploit recent international conflicts to criticize the United States for harming global security and present itself as a source of global stability.**

- This is China's first White Paper on National Security; previous Defense White Papers focused on external threats and military modernization. While the White Paper largely reiterated consistent CCP policy themes, it was only published in Mandarin, suggesting it is directed at a domestic audience.
- In a thinly veiled reference to the United States, China's white paper criticized "some great powers" for "disregarding their international responsibilities" and "damaging global stability," while it presented China as the more responsible international power that is "injecting certainty and stability into a turbulent world."<sup>29</sup> Although China has supplied dual-use goods to Russia and helped prop up Iran and its terrorist proxies in the Middle East, the paper aimed to present China as a leading advocate for peaceful solutions to the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict.<sup>30</sup>
- Despite China's increasing use of illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive actions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, the paper blamed the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific for destabilizing the region.<sup>31</sup> The white paper also criticized the United States for "old thinking" on "hegemony" and "alliance systems," and it promoted China's Global Security Initiative as an alternative model of global order that reflects "Chinese wisdom" by focusing on China's versions of multilateralism, dialogue, and non-traditional security cooperation.<sup>32</sup> The white paper warned of the ways "Western anti-China forces" challenge China's "internal affairs," from "stirring up trouble" in the South and East China Seas to supporting Tibetan and Uyghur activism.
- The white paper claimed that Beijing strives for "peaceful unification" with Taiwan, but it also insisted that China "absolutely will not promise to abandon the use of force" and reiterated that the "Taiwan question" remains a "red line" for U.S.-China relations.<sup>33</sup> While denouncing "Taiwan independence forces," the paper placed more emphasis on increasing ties with people in Taiwan than some prior official statements.<sup>34</sup>

**The white paper used General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping's "holistic security" concept to justify the CCP's authoritarian one-party rule and its resistance to "Western" democracy, freedom, and human rights.<sup>35</sup>**

- The paper reiterated the CCP's view that domestic social and political cohesion are the bedrocks of national security and resilience against international threats.<sup>36</sup> It argued that "the absolute leadership" of the CCP is necessary to maintain "political stability," combat separatism, and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>37</sup> Both Xi and CCP leadership promote the core tenet that unchallenged CCP rule is necessary for China's security and development in a rapidly changing world.<sup>38</sup>
- The white paper also insisted that fully implementing Party's crackdowns on Tibet and Xinjiang and resisting Western attempts to promote "democracy, freedom, human rights, and so-called "universal values"" are keys to maintaining social stability.<sup>39</sup>

**The white paper used the "right to development" as a pretext to justify the CCP's authoritarian security practices and criticize U.S. tariff policy.**

- Based on the premise that "high quality development" requires "high level security" and that "development problems can become security risks," the white paper used the imperative of economic development to justify the necessity of the Party's "absolute leadership."<sup>40</sup>
- The paper reiterated that protecting the "right to development" is a "red line for China's national security" and explicitly criticized new U.S. tariffs as "infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of all countries" and "severely impacting the stability of the global economic order."<sup>41</sup>

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