

# Does China Support Houthis' Military Capabilities in the Red Sea?

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## Introduction

American accusations against China for allegedly supporting the Houthi movement have intensified in recent months. The most recent claims emerged in mid-April, when the U.S. State Department asserted that “a Chinese satellite company is aiding Houthi attacks in Yemen targeting American interests.” China has firmly denied these allegations, with the Foreign Ministry in Beijing stating that China has actively contributed to de-escalating tensions since the Red Sea crisis began to escalate.

This is not the first instance of the United States accusing its primary global rival of supporting the Houthis. Earlier this year, American and Israeli media, citing U.S. intelligence sources, reported that China had been cooperating with the Houthis by providing a supply chain of advanced weaponry. These weapons reportedly rely on components manufactured by private Chinese firms. The reports further claimed that China fosters a permissive environment that facilitates the purchase of such components from domestic manufacturers.

American and Israeli officials frequently emphasize the relationship between China and Iran—the Houthis' principal supporter since their emergence as an armed group in northern Yemen over two decades ago—suggesting that this alliance has enabled Chinese military and logistical support to the Houthis.

Similar claims have been raised in recent years by American and European media outlets, including Germany's *Deutsche Welle*, which have cited experts and military officials. For instance, The *International Interest* reported that certain advanced missiles in the Houthi arsenal—absent from Iran's inventory but known to be exclusively used by the Chinese military—may indicate direct Chinese involvement in supplying these weapons.

This study examines the U.S. allegations and China's potential role in the context of rising Sino-American rivalry. It also explores the broader shifts in China's foreign policy, which has gradually moved away from its traditional stance of non-interventionism and avoiding tensions. In recent years, China has increasingly engaged in regional political, military, and security dynamics—most notably through the establishment of a military base in Djibouti. This base is strategically located in the Horn of Africa along the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a vital artery of global commerce connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe.

## China's Regional Presence

Since current President Xi Jinping took office in March 2013, China has sought to adopt a balanced foreign and security policy, particularly with regard to strategic geography. In his White Paper, President Xi reinforced the doctrine of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, while maintaining the hierarchical structure of strategic objectives outlined in earlier white papers dating back to 1995. He emphasized the concept of “comprehensive security, common security, and cooperative security—a framework based on mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation. This vision prioritizes non-war military interventions to counter security challenges and threats posed by hostile powers”<sup>1</sup>

There are clear signs that China's foreign policy is undergoing meaningful shifts. Rather than remaining insular and disengaged, China has cautiously begun to increase its participation in international affairs. However, this engagement remains carefully measured and rooted in long-standing principles that prioritize the protection of national interests. China aims to strengthen its economic openness and protects its political presence.

According to China's vision of the concept of comprehensive and common security, foreign interventions are justified only when they serve to protect Chinese interests, secure trade routes, or evacuate Chinese nationals from conflict zones.

In recent years, China has markedly increased its presence in the Middle East. Since announcing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has focused on strategic land and maritime corridors to connect with Asia, Africa, and Europe. This shift reflects a broader transformation in China's foreign policy, driven by continuous reassessments of its global strategy. Beijing has begun actively competing for influence in strategic regions, strengthening its foothold in the Middle East—a trend evident over the past decade.<sup>2</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's foreign policy has emphasized its aspiration to become a responsible global power. The Chinese leadership has highlighted the importance of greater engagement in international affairs, in line with the philosophy of a peaceful rise. This orientation has encouraged Chinese strategists and international relations experts to formulate appropriate plans to support this vision.

For instance, scholar Wang Jisi proposed a strategic plan titled “Marching Westward,” aiming to prepare China for political engagement in western regions, including the Arab world, to secure pivotal interests and establish a new balance of power with the United States. Meanwhile, expert Li Yonghu suggested a dual-track approach: fostering good relations with major existing powers while enhancing ties with neighboring and developing countries, forming what he termed a »strategic peripheral belt.”<sup>3</sup>

Recently, China's diplomatic engagement with Middle Eastern countries—including longstanding U.S. allies—has significantly expanded. In addressing the shared challenges of economic globalization, Chinese discourse has emphasized principles of equality and cooperation, offering a contrast to the U.S. approach. China has actively pursued a policy of strategic expansion, aiming to counterbalance American influence while forging alliances to secure vital oil resources. As China continues to grow economically and militarily, it has gained greater freedom of action on the global stage, seeking to position itself as a major power capable of challenging the U.S.-led Western order. Meanwhile, the U.S. focus on the “war on terror” since 2001 has created strategic openings that China has leveraged to increase its influence across various regions.<sup>4</sup>

The Horn of Africa holds immense geostrategic importance for global powers due to its control over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden. For China, the region is critical to securing its BRI ambitions, serving as a gateway for Chinese trade from the mainland to Europe.<sup>5</sup>

China has leveraged its economic and diplomatic capabilities to establish a secure foothold in this strategic area. Notably, media reports have cited U.S. intelligence suggesting that China supports the Houthis in threatening maritime navigation, in exchange for safe passage of Chinese vessels.

### Washington and Beijing: From Rivalry to Confrontation

The ancient Greek historian and military general Thucydides once posited a theory known as the *Thucydides Trap*, which suggests that when a rising power threatens a dominant power, war becomes the most likely outcome. Thucydides framed this in the context of the conflict between Sparta, the dominant power of his time, and the rising city-state of Athens. Drawing from this, American scholar Graham T. Allison concludes that China and the United States are heading toward war, as China's growing power increasingly challenges American dominance. Allison points out that in 12 out of 16 historical cases over the past 500 years, the rise of a new power confronted an established one, and the result was bloodshed.

Discussions about this theory—or what some call the “New Cold War,” has increasingly been used to describe the intensifying tensions between the United States and China. There are many indicators supporting this perspective, including the trade war launched by the Trump administration, repeated U.S. accusations against China, and the imposition of economic sanctions on Chinese firms.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, critics argue that this so-called “New Cold War” is more reflective of ideological bias or part of a traditional propaganda campaign to demonize new challengers than it is of an inevitable or essential conflict. From their perspective, the narrative serves more to incite fear than to capture the true nature of Sino-American conflict.

Historical lessons suggest that when any country's economy reaches 60% of the United States' GDP, it is perceived as a threat to American global dominance and will inevitably face Washington's coercive policies<sup>7</sup>.

From its early months in office, the Trump administration in its second term quickly escalated tensions with China by imposing tariffs on Chinese goods—a move met with reciprocal measures from Beijing. The two sides engaged in a tit-for-tat tariff war, risking severe damage to both economies and pushing their trade conflict to a point of no return.<sup>8</sup>

Considering recent developments in the Middle East—particularly the escalation in the Red Sea and the U.S. stance toward Houthis in Yemen—the likelihood of further escalation between the two superpowers remains plausible, though within limits that still prevent direct confrontation. However, Washington appears determined to inflict significant damage on China's economy, using the pretext of curbing the Houthi armed movement in Yemen. This aligns with Trump's strategy, which prioritizes confronting the Houthis to secure Washington's interests and those of its allies in the Red Sea, as well as protecting global trade routes.

In this context, the U.S. administration seems more intent than ever on engaging in multiple battles against enemies and competitors, including China, Iran, and the Houthis. The American narrative, which accuses China of supporting the Houthis, appears to be a way of consolidating multiple objectives into a single strategy. Containing China's expanding influence has become a top priority, as it would—by necessity—deprive the Houthis of one of their most crucial sources of support and arms. Additionally, escalating pressure on Iran and tightening economic sanctions could sever the strategic ties between Tehran and Beijing, cutting off Iran's oil revenue from China and depriving the latter of the cheap Iranian oil it relies on.

From this perspective, the U.S. airstrikes targeting Houthi weapons depots and fuel facilities in the ports of Hodeida and Ras Issa can be seen as a strategic necessity to weaken the Houthis militarily and economically. It also aims to disrupt a potential market for Chinese arms in Yemen—a country that borders major energy sources and key U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States—which also overlooks the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a crucial global shipping lane.

It is worth noting that certain U.S. strategic visions have crystallized in recent years, urging the American administration to make efforts to secure freedom of navigation not only in East Asia—particularly the South China Sea—but also in the Red Sea (Southwest Asia). These visions emphasize the need to link the strategic importance of the two regions. Proponents of this view argue that the U.S. has “proven to be a lukewarm defender of freedom of navigation in vast areas like the South China Sea, where China continues to illegally assert its ‘indisputable sovereignty’—that is, state ownership—over an economically vital maritime route<sup>9</sup>.«

As strategic analyst James Holmes, chair of the “J.C. Wylie” seat at the Naval War College, observes: if successive U.S. administrations have shown little resolve to defend freedom of navigation in East Asia—a region of critical importance to the Pentagon—they are unlikely to take a firmer stance in the Red Sea.<sup>10</sup>

If the South China Sea issue becomes a priority for the Trump administration amid escalating tensions with the Houthis to secure the Red Sea, this would only add further complications to the potential conflict with China. From the American perspective, China is viewed not only as the primary adversary in East Asia, but also as a backer of the Houthis—an actor seen as disrupting maritime security in the Red Sea and threatening global trade routes.

### **China and the Houthis: Oil, Arms, and Satellite Support**

Recently, the U.S. Department of State explicitly accused the Chinese company Chang Guang of directly supporting Houthi attacks on American interests. During a routine press briefing on Thursday, April 17, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce stated: “We can confirm reports that the Chang Guang Satellite Technology Company has been directly supporting the terrorist attacks by Iran-backed Houthis against U.S. interests.”

Bruce acknowledged a report by the Financial Times, citing U.S. officials, which claimed that the Chinese company—linked to the People’s Liberation Army—had provided imagery enabling Houthi rebels to target U.S. warships and commercial vessels passing through the Red Sea. She noted that the company’s assistance to the Houthis continued despite Washington raising the issue with Beijing through diplomatic channels.

Earlier last year, the American outlet *Politico* revealed, citing Western intelligence officials, that China was “inadvertently aiding Iran” in disrupting Red Sea shipping, thereby hindering global trade flows. The report attributed this to China’s “illicit” oil purchases from Iran, which indirectly fund the Houthis’ campaign of attacks in the Red Sea—actions that have had a severe impact on global shipping.<sup>11</sup>

China sources roughly 10% of its oil from Iran, with Chinese companies securing crude at steep discounts. According to *Politico*, Beijing purchases approximately 90% of Iran's oil exports, including crude sold by the *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC)—the entity responsible for Iran's overseas military operations. The report highlighted that the IRGC's Quds Force plays a central role in “training and funding Iran's proxies in the Middle East, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen.” According to *Politico*, Iranian regime faces financial strain due to international sanctions, which compel Tehran “to allocate annual oil quotas to the Quds Force for overseas sales through a complex network of front companies. This has enabled Iran to continue financing its proxies.”

In January, both American and Israeli media cited U.S. sources, indicating expanding cooperation between Beijing and the Houthis, including a weapons supply chain. According to these sources, China has provided the Houthi rebels with advanced arms. Intelligence assessments suggest that Chinese-made weapons are being used in Houthi attacks as part of arrangements in which Chinese-flagged vessels are granted safe passage through contested waters. In return, Beijing is believed to be extending political cover to the Houthis. Moreover, U.S. intelligence has concluded that the advanced weapons deployed by the Houthis rely heavily on components produced by private Chinese companies, which operate in a permissive environment for arms procurement<sup>12</sup>.

According to Israeli media, Washington has repeatedly shared details of this supply chain with Beijing, including lists of Chinese companies involved in arming the Houthis. Yet, there has been no indication of any punitive measures taken by the Chinese government against these firms<sup>13</sup>.

What continues to raise international concern is the scale and sophistication of the Houthi arsenal. Their attacks in the Red Sea have revealed the use of highly advanced and diverse weaponry capable of inflicting significant damage on commercial vessels and disrupting international maritime traffic. This has prompted urgent questions about the origin of these arms—particularly those that appear beyond the capabilities of Iran, the Houthis' principal backer. American strategic expert James Holmes has highlighted this very point, noting that the “Houthis have fired an anti-ship ballistic missile, a category of weapon previously known to be in the exclusive possession of the Chinese military<sup>14</sup>.«

A report published by *The National Interest* magazine featured analysis by Holmes, who stated that “it is difficult to downplay the Houthi group's strategic project”—a “massive undertaking spearheaded by an Iran-backed organization that resembles a state, with Iran itself acting as China's unofficial proxy.”

The American expert raised the question: Is Beijing sharing missile technology? He noted that it seems unlikely that Chinese military overseers would independently transfer such a powerful weapons system to Iran, as its eventual deployment to Houthi arsenals—or other groups—would depend on Tehran's discretion<sup>15</sup>.

In response to American accusations, China has opted for quiet denials to avoid potential escalation with the United States. While Beijing occasionally rushes to categorically refute allegations, it often chooses to ignore them altogether, with officials issuing brief, measured responses. For instance, when addressing recent accusations, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson simply stated they were “unaware of the claims,” while accusing Washington of inflaming tensions through pressure tactics<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, the relationship between the Houthis and China cannot be examined in isolation from their common denominator: Iran. Tehran maintains both declared and undeclared economic and strategic understandings with Beijing, while simultaneously backing the Houthis. This underscores Iran's pivotal role in facilitating agreements and fostering cooperation between the two—even though China, at least officially, consistently affirms its support for Yemen's legitimate government. Beijing emphasizes its commitment to ending the war, urging all Yemeni factions to pursue dialogue and peace, though it acknowledges engaging with the Houthis while condemning their Red Sea attacks<sup>17</sup>.

In summary, escalating political, military, economic, and trade tensions have placed the region on a razor's edge. The repercussions are evident in the airstrikes targeting the Houthis following the U.S. decision to designate them as a foreign terrorist organization. Meanwhile, American accusations against China for supporting the Houthis align with the Trump administration's broader escalation strategy—one that appears to favor confrontation over détente with the rising Chinese power whose expanding economic influence threatens White House dominance in regions spanning the South China Sea to the warm waters encompassed by Beijing's decade-old Belt and Road Initiative.



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