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**“Operation Epic Fury”
Is Not ‘Israel First’ but
‘America First’: Strategic
Energy Leverage and the
Targeting of China**

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“Operation Epic Fury” Is Not ‘Israel First’ but ‘America First’: Strategic Energy Leverage and the Targeting of China

Abstract

The unleashing of “Operation Epic Fury” by US Central Command (CENTCOM) jointly with Israel (Operation Lions Roar), has tactfully and strategically erased the power stamps of Iran. This paper argues that “Operation Epic Fury” reflects an ‘America First’ grand strategy that is aimed less at Iran and more at constraining China’s rise. While public narratives emphasise nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, and support for Israel, a broader reading situates US’ actions within intensifying US-China rivalry. By leveraging sanctions and influence over energy chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, and targeting oil-rich states like Iran and Venezuela, Washington can shape global energy flows that underpin China’s manufacturing economy. Combined with trade restrictions, technology controls, and alliance-building, energy pressure becomes a structural tool to exploit China’s vulnerabilities without direct military confrontation.

Keywords: Operation Epic Fury, America First, China -US rivalry, Energy, Trade, Tariff

Introduction: Epic Fury is not against Iran but China

Public narratives surrounding recent US involvement in the Middle East, particularly under the rubric of what has been described in political discourse as “Operation Epic Fury” have centred on familiar themes of countering Iran, stabilising energy markets, supporting Israel, deterring nuclear proliferation, destroying a ballistic missile program capable of reaching the American continent, and combating drug trafficking linked to Venezuela. However, a broader strategic reading reveals a deeper objective.

This is not primarily an “Israel First” war as claimed by the detractors in the US, but it is surely an “America First” strategy at play. It is simply not about regime change, terrorism, nuclear weapons denial or narcotics control especially when trade playoffs, tariff barriers, and muscling out of the Venezuelan President is seen, in a holistic manner, as a trend for an America First psyche—the one aimed at constraining the rise of China by limiting its access to energy, rare earth and elements; as also disciplining others, dreaming of a multi-polar world wherein US maintains its “protector” stance. Making America Great Again is not a rhetoric, but is a grand strategy, in slow roll out, in the manner Chinese do “Salami Slicing”.

Major newspapers have documented the intensifying US-China rivalry, China’s dependence on imported oil, sanctions and pressure campaigns against Iran and Venezuela, and the geopolitical importance of the Middle East in an era of renewed great-power competition. When read together, these strands point to the deliberate strategy to restrict China’s run towards a future, driven by niche technology, by leveraging energy chokepoints and political influence in oil-rich and rare earth material states and denying or constraining easy availability of these critical resources—measures that will weaken China’s structural vulnerabilities. The Middle East, in this view, is not an end in itself but a mere theatre in a larger contest with China.

Everyone else, including the Gulf countries in the ongoing Operation Epic Fury and Operation Lion Roar, are just collaterals.

The Strategic Context: US-China Rivalry

The strategic competition between United States and China has been widely recognised in mainstream reporting. The New York Times has described the US-China relationship as increasingly defined by technological, military, and economic rivalry, with policymakers framing Beijing as Washington’s primary long-term competitor (Swanson, A. 2023). Similarly, The Washington Post has reported on the bipartisan consensus in Washington that China represents the foremost geopolitical challenge of the 21st century (Rogin, J. 2023). China, under Xi Jinping, has not hidden its ambition to achieve the “Chinese Dream”, and had become openly strident with aggressive actions, in the immediate neighbourhood, thus challenging the regional countries and indirectly questioning the American influence in its proximity.

This was backed by the phenomenal rise of China as an economic power, driven by the lust of the First World for affordable goods. The resultant surplus funds were doled out to the countries around the world as a policy of ‘debt trap’ to gain influence in international forums and leverage for minerals, resources and domestic policy. The behaviour of many countries was controlled and the aggressive and arrogant Chinese diplomatic activities were in overt display. Significant investments in technology and defence industry enabled rolling out of new warships, rockets, aircrafts, air defence systems, drones and missile systems; modernisation of the military was also in full swing. China started by subduing the smaller nations within the region through display of military might— it clearly had dreams of becoming a world power, not as equal but as a competitor to US.

In this context, every regional policy must be interpreted through the lens of strategic competition. If China is the pacing threat, then Middle East policy cannot be isolated from Indo-Pacific calculations. The Trump administration’s emphasis on tariffs, trade leverage, technology restrictions, and supply chain realignments formed part of what many analysts saw as an effort to decouple or rebalance economic relations with China (Bradsher, K. 2020). But trade measures alone do not reshape global power hierarchies. Energy, the foundational input of industrial growth, remains central— this is what Operation Epic Fury is all about, after Venezuela—it is the obvious next step.

China had Challenged US Eminence in Economic Domain

China’s rise as an ‘economic powerhouse’ was built on a strategic understanding of ‘one powerful global force’ —the world’s demand for cheap manufactured goods. Beginning in the late 20th century and accelerating after its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China positioned itself as the central hub of global manufacturing. It combined low labour costs, massive rural-to-urban workforce migration, heavy state investment in infrastructure, and export-oriented industrial policy to dominate global supply chains.

Western corporations, seeking lower production costs and higher margins, outsourced manufacturing to Chinese factories at an unprecedented scale. Electronics, textiles, machinery, furniture, toys, and later high-tech components flowed from China to North America and Europe. This export surge generated enormous trade surpluses, allowing Beijing to accumulate vast foreign exchange reserves and reinvest heavily in industrial upgrading, ports, rail networks, and advanced manufacturing capabilities.

China, however, did not restrict itself to low-end production. Using technology transfers, joint ventures, and state-backed industrial policies, it steadily climbed the value chain. It moved from assembling foreign-designed goods to producing its own brands in telecommunications, renewable energy equipment, electric vehicles, and consumer electronics. The strategy was deliberate to use low-cost manufacturing as the entry point, then leverage scale and capital to develop indigenous innovation.

Meanwhile, the United States shifted towards services, finance, and high-end technology, while its manufacturing base shrank. The resulting economic interdependence created both prosperity and vulnerability. China became the “factory of the world” while America remained the “world’s largest consumer market and technological leader”.

Today, this manufacturing dominance underpins China’s broader geopolitical ambitions. Control over supply chains— from pharmaceuticals to electronics— provides leverage in its strategic competition with the United States. What began as cheap production has evolved into structural economic power, reshaping the global balance challenging eminence of US.

Chinese Military Power: A Threat to US in the Near Future

Over the past two decades, China transformed from a regionally focused force into a rapidly modernising military power, capable of contesting US’ dominance in key theatres. Fuelled by sustained economic growth, Beijing has invested heavily in advanced naval fleets, anti-ship ballistic missiles, fifth-generation fighter jets, cyber warfare units, space capabilities, and artificial intelligence enabled systems. Its navy is now the world’s largest by ship count, and has expanded operations in the South China Sea, East China Sea,

and increasingly the broader Indo-Pacific.

China’s strategy emphasises anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities designed to deter or complicate US intervention near its periphery, particularly around Taiwan. It has also built overseas logistics facilities, such as its base in Djibouti, signalling expanding global ambitions.

While the United States retained advantages in combat experience, global alliances, and overall power projection, China’s rapid military modernisation has narrowed the gap, reshaped strategic calculations and intensified great-power competition in the 21st century.

China’s Oil Vulnerability

China imports more than 70 percent of its oil, thus, making it heavily dependent on foreign suppliers. Financial Times has repeatedly emphasised China’s growing reliance on imported energy and its exposure to maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz (Mitchell, T. 2019). This vulnerability is not incidental but structural and unavoidable.

Iran and Venezuela, both subject to US sanctions, have emerged, in recent years, as discounted suppliers of oil to China. Reporting by The Wall Street Journal has detailed how Chinese refiners have continued purchasing Iranian crude through intermediaries despite sanctions pressure, and how Venezuelan exports have increasingly flowed towards Asia (Faucon, B. 2023). These transactions underscore a key fact and that is energy trade is not merely commercial but geopolitical.

By exerting pressure on Tehran and Caracas, Washington influences not only regional stability but also the direction of global oil flows. Sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and coercive signalling reshape supply chains—the strategic value lies not in physically seizing of oil fields, but in shaping who has reliable access.

China’s crude oil imports via the Strait of Hormuz are significant but vary by estimate and time period. According to analyses based on US Energy Information Administration (EIA) data, China imported about 5.4 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil through the Strait of Hormuz in the first quarter of 2025 (Girault, J. 2025), which represents a substantial portion of its overall import needs—total imports often exceed 10 – 11 million bpd. Much of this oil comes from Middle Eastern suppliers whose shipments must transit Hormuz enroute to Asia. More than 90% of the Iran’s oil export is bought by China (Girault, J. 2025).

Estimates from other energy analysts suggest that roughly 45 % of China’s total oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, hence exposing a key vulnerability in its energy security should that route be disrupted.

China, to overcome the vulnerabilities of choke points along various critical sea lane of communications had explored and implemented multiple infrastructure projects along the land routes—important ones being through Pakistan and Myanmar—both are in disarray for reasons pointing in direction of the non-state and state actors, that are working at behest of the US.

Iran: Nuclear Threat or Nuclear Leverage?

Official rhetoric surrounding Iran have focused on nuclear proliferation and regional destabilisation. Newspapers have reported extensively on concerns about Iran’s uranium enrichment, support to regional terror organisations and missile programs (Sanger, D. 2024). These concerns are legitimate and widely acknowledged but are regional and with hardly any direct influence and impact to the American continent. These are also primarily directed towards Israel and other countries in the Gulf. The leveraging of non-state actors like Houthi, Hamas and Hezbollah has been a reality for decades.

However, comparisons illuminate strategic asymmetry—North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and continues advancing its missile capabilities, yet Washington has not pursued sustained regime-removal efforts there. A known rogue state like Pakistan has nuclear weapons and there are established fears of these falling in

hands of terror organisations. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has acknowledged the role of Pakistan in nesting and managing terror organisations as tools for state policy. Yet the proactive engagements have continued with this country that harboured America's number one enemy viz. Osama bin Laden.

The difference is not merely ideological. Iran sits astride the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil supplies transit. Its reserves rank among the world's largest. Disruptions in Iran reverberates directly through energy markets.

The Guardian has reported on how tensions with Iran routinely send oil prices higher, affecting global supply chains (Borger, J. 2024). Such disruptions disproportionately affect major importers. Among them, China stands out. A tightening of Iranian exports constrains Beijing's options and raises its acquisition costs.

In this light, pressure on Iran becomes not only a regional security policy but also a structural constraint on China's growth trajectory. The deliberate or inadvertent closure, as a collateral of the ongoing conflict, will have major impact on the world economies, benefitting only US. In this doldrum, China gets hit the hardest—its economy is struggling and there is an internal instability fuelled by the slowing down of economy across the world.

Venezuela: Narcotics or Oil

Public justifications for strong US policy towards Venezuela often emphasise drug trafficking, democratic backsliding, and humanitarian crisis. Yet newspapers have noted that Venezuela holds some of the world's largest proven oil reserves (Vyas, K. 2022). Sanctions imposed by Washington have dramatically reshaped the country's export patterns, pushing it towards non-Western buyers, chief among them being China.

However, sanctions also reduce production capacity and complicate transactions, limiting volume and reliability. When the US pressures Venezuela, it influences global supply distribution. Even partial disruptions tighten global markets and increase volatility.

If narcotics was the primary driver of military or coercive policy, one might expect comparable approaches towards other major trafficking corridors. Rather than acting on Columbia or Mexico, Venezuela became the target. Therefore, the pattern aligns more closely with energy leverage rather than 'drugs'. Countries with massive hydrocarbon reserves, particularly those aligned with or supplying China, are becoming focal points of US-led pressure.

Energy, Rare Earth and Critical Minerals Central to Grand Strategy

Energy dominance has long been a pillar of US global strategy. The shale revolution transformed the United States into a leading producer, thus reducing domestic vulnerability and enhancing geopolitical flexibility. As The New York Times has observed, American energy production has altered global market dynamics and strengthened US' leverage abroad (Krauss, C. 2019).

If Washington possesses relative insulation from oil shocks compared to China, then disruptions will hurt Beijing more acutely. Energy crisis raise manufacturing costs, squeeze margins, and generate inflationary pressures. For an export-dependent economy, this is strategically significant.

The access control of countries and regions rich in critical minerals, crucial for future technology, is central to US-China competition. These are essential for clean energy, semiconductors, advanced weapons systems, and electric vehicles (EVs).

Rare earth elements (REEs) are crucial for high-performance magnets used in EV motors, wind turbines, fighter jets, and missile guidance systems. While mined in several countries, China dominates their processing and refining.

Lithium, cobalt, and nickel are foundational to lithium-ion batteries powering EVs, grid storage,

drones, and portable electronics. Lithium is concentrated in Australia and South America’s ‘Lithium Triangle’ (Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia). Cobalt is heavily mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo, while nickel is abundant in Indonesia. China has invested heavily in refining and overseas mining stakes in all three.

Graphite is essential for battery anodes, and China controls most global processing capacity. Gallium and germanium are vital for advanced semiconductors, radar systems, 5G, and solar panels. Here also, China dominates their supply and has used export controls as leverage.

As China has already gained access to most of the deposits and is way ahead in processing, the competition is less about raw deposits and more about control of supply chains and refining capacity. China currently leads in processing dominance, while the US is responding with domestic production incentives, allied partnerships, and export controls—turning minerals into a defining geopolitical battleground of the 21st century. This is where energy comes in again. These processes, refining and production require significant consumption of energy as well. Iran, inter alia the Hormuz, becomes a major leverage point.

The broader pattern thus emerging are four-fold. **Firstly**, Tariffs and trade restrictions will pressure the already stressed China’s industrial base as manufacturing is already moving out and countries, particularly the western powers, are attempting to decouple. **Secondly**, technology controls will constrain access to China in advanced semiconductors that are critical for the future niche technology including required for military industrial complex.

Thirdly, military partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, to encircle the Chinese maritime periphery, that was aggressive and revisionist in past decade and more. **Lastly**, regain energy leverage in the Middle East to target its most critical resource dependency.

This multi-domain approach, if analysed correctly, reflects incremental pressure rather than direct confrontation with China.

NATO, Japan and Incremental Containment

Beyond energy, US policy has emphasises on strengthening alliances. Reports in The Washington Post has highlighted US efforts to push NATO members to increase defence spending and coordinate more closely on strategic threats (Karen Young, K.D. 2022). Similar pressure has been applied to Japan and other Indo-Pacific partners. In the contemporary world and geopolitical arena, there is only one hurdle for US, which is China.

Such bolstering of allied military capacity aligns with a containment framework against China. The Middle East, though geographically distant from East Asia, remains integral as energy flows connect these regions. If the US can stabilise, influence, or pressure key suppliers, then it can indirectly shape Indo-Pacific power balances.

The “next squeeze”, as some strategists suggest, would logically focus on maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific. Yet the groundwork lies in energy markets.

The Energy Shock and Global Pain

All nations suffer during energy crisis. European economies, heavily reliant on imports and are vulnerable to price spikes. Developing nations face inflationary pressures. Yet China’s scale magnifies its exposure.

China’s manufacturing-driven economy requires vast and stable energy inputs. Price volatility disrupts production chains. As the Financial Times has noted, global oil price fluctuations have significant implications for China’s economic planning and industrial output.

Thus, while global pain is distributed, the strategic aim may be asymmetric impact. An “energy squeeze” does not require direct confrontation. It operates through markets. It is not about military confrontation but more about ‘economic squeeze through energy shock’.

Reclaiming Influence in the Middle East

The argument that the Middle East is being “reclaimed” must be contextualised. Over the past decade, US policymakers have often signalled a pivot towards Asia. Yet great-power competition has drawn renewed attention to Middle Eastern alignments.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expanded Beijing’s economic footprint across the region—infrastructure investments, port development, and energy deals have deepened ties. American policymakers, according to multiple newspaper analyses, have grown concerned about Chinese inroads.

Reasserting influence in oil-rich states will serve multiple purposes. It will limit adversarial alignment, preserve energy market stability favourable to US interests and constrain China’s strategic autonomy by affecting the economic progress and investments in military infrastructure.

This is not about direct colonial-style control but about influence through trade agreements, sanction regimes, diplomatic pressure, and market shaping. This is smart US manoeuvre and classic old colonial British playbook of 17th and 18th Century.

America First, Not Israel First

Although US policy often aligns closely with Israel’s security concerns, framing Middle Eastern interventions solely through that lens obscures broader calculations. Support for Israel may coincide with American interests, but the structural target of energy leverage suggests a larger objective.

The Iranian challenge has been a threat to Israel for last five decades. The Americans have pursued a policy of dialogue, persuasion through international interventions and at times ignored the threat to the region and to Israel. The rise of China, rapidly in past two decades, with clear strategic direction is to compete with US, as part of bipolar world, is not unknown. The time was ripe and possibility of the Iranians achieving a credible nuclear weapon profile and ballistic missile system, that could threaten entire gulf and the American continent, has provided the *Jus ad Bellum* for launching ‘Operation Epic Fury’.

An America-first strategy prioritises US global dominance. If China represents the principal challenger, then weakening its vulnerabilities becomes paramount. Iran and Venezuela are not random cases—they are energy nodes connected to Beijing.

Conclusion: Deliberate Strategy to Regain Eminence in a Multipolar Era

When viewed collectively, it is observed that trade tariffs, semiconductor restrictions, alliance strengthening, sanctions on oil-rich states, and diplomatic pressure reveal a coherence in the pattern for regain influence that was lost in past few decades. The Middle East is only the latest theatre in a global contest with China.

Newspaper reporting documents each piece individually such as sanctions on Iran, oil disruptions, China’s import dependence, NATO realignments, and trade wars, when interpreted together, suggests a deliberate Grand Strategy rather than episodic reaction. These reveals structural competition for containment and roll back.

In the first quarter of the 21st century, China rose dramatically. Regaining relative control by US required multi-dimensional leverage without a direct faceoff in the military realm or the economic contests—and in all these equations, energy remains a foundational element for control. If Washington can shape access to nearly half of global proven reserves indirectly, through influence over key states and choke points, then it

does not need a direct fight !!

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Lieutenant General Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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