

Beijing Xiangshan Forum: China's Surging Influence in the Asia-Pacific through Track 1.5 Diplomacy

Bhagyashree Nimbalkar

Introduction

Track 1.5 security dialogues and forums have assumed an outsized strategic significance in the Asia-Pacific, where territorial disputes, great-power competition, and rapidly evolving military capabilities intersect with complex economic interdependencies.¹ The Beijing Xiangshan Forum (BXF), held from 7-9 May 2026 under the theme 'Global Security Governance: Challenges and Approaches,' marked its 20th anniversary.² This forum navigator meeting drew over 120 defence officials, scholars, and representatives from more than 40 countries, signalling its continuing centrality in Asia-Pacific security discourse.³

The Forum's 2026 iteration carries a particular strategic weight. It convenes against the backdrop of one of the most turbulent geopolitical moments of the decade: the ongoing Iran-United States (US) conflict, which erupted in Feb 2026, has reshaped energy markets, strained US military readiness, and generated widespread anxiety across the Indo-Pacific.⁴ As American strategic attention is partially redirected toward the Middle East, China has seized the moment to consolidate its diplomatic leadership through platforms like the BXF. This article argues that China's rising influence in the Asia-Pacific is meaningfully advanced by two critical dynamics: first, the geopolitical opportunity created by the Iran-US conflict; and second, the distinctive institutional character of the BXF co-hosted by Chinese state-linked bodies, which gives it a policy translation capacity that Western-hosted forums such as Singapore's Shangri-La Dialogue cannot replicate in the Asia-Pacific.

The Iran-US Conflict as a Geopolitical Opportunity for Chinese Diplomatic Leadership

The economic shockwaves of the conflict reverberated instantly across the Asia-Pacific, with oil prices surging, stock markets falling, and energy-importing nations scrambling to secure alternative supply chains. For China, the conflict has presented a complex but ultimately manageable set of strategic trade-offs, and it has carefully positioned itself as a stabilising mediator. The 2026 Institute of Southeast Asian Studies titled State of Southeast Asia survey starkly captured the regional mood: 52 per cent of respondents said they would side with China if forced to choose between China and the US.⁵ This dramatic shift in regional sentiment has provided fertile ground for China's diplomatic outreach through the BXF.

The 2026 BXF navigator meeting addressed 'Emerging security challenges in the Asia-Pacific' as one of its central roundtable themes. This formulation encompasses the energy and security disruptions flowing from the Iran conflict.⁶ At this moment of deep uncertainty about the US reliability as a security guarantor, China has leveraged the BXF by convening defence officials and security scholars from over 40 countries to frame itself as the indispensable provider of regional stability. The Forum's choice of theme 'Global Security Governance: Challenges and Approaches' positions Beijing not as a challenger of the existing order but as a responsible architect of its improvement.⁷ This narrative resonates strongly with Global South participants who bore the sharpest economic costs of the Hormuz crisis. As the Atlantic Council has observed, an overextended US creates space for China to position itself as a long-term stabiliser in contested regions.⁸

Institutional Architecture

The second, and perhaps more structurally consequential, source of China's growing influence through the BXF lies in the Forum's unique institutional design. Unlike the Shangri-La Dialogue organised by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a non-governmental think tank, the BXF is co-hosted by the China Association for Military Science and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies. These institutions maintain direct linkages to the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese state apparatus. This is not an administrative detail; it is a structural feature that fundamentally shapes the forum's capacity to translate policy. At the Shangri-La Dialogue, participants engage in open but ultimately non-binding exchanges. The IISS, as an independent organiser, can neither commit to policy positions on behalf of any government nor ensure that discussions translate into concrete directives.

The BXF, by contrast, operates as what one analyst writing for the Swiss Institute of Artificial Intelligence described as a 'Policy workshop rather than just a discussion space', a venue where Beijing introduces governance rules for cyber, space, artificial intelligence, and sea lanes while engaging states seeking alternatives to a US-led order.⁹ Senior Colonel Zhou Bo, writing for China-US Focus, confirmed that since 2014, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence has directly shaped the Forum into a Track 1.5 meeting that includes both senior governmental officials and eminent scholars, ensuring that deliberations are insulated from purely academic drift and remain policy-relevant.¹⁰ This institutional proximity to the state apparatus accelerates the conversion of dialogue into directive. The BXF is thus not a venue for open-ended deliberation but a choreographed exercise in what the Diplomat has described as China's 'most assertive challenge yet to the Western-led international system'.¹¹

Moreover, the 2026 BXF Navigator Meeting explicitly identified its purpose as 'Making intellectual contribution to the building of a more just and equitable global governance system', language drawn directly from China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), which

Beijing has used the BXF to operationalise since its announcement. The Forum's commemorative session on its 20th anniversary, titled 'The Role of International Forums in Global Security Governance', further entrenched the BXF's identity not as a neutral convening space but as an instrument of Chinese diplomatic strategy. The frameworks of 'Sovereign Equality,' 'True Multilateralism,' and a 'Community with a shared future,' BXF systematically advances to build normative consensus in China's favour among Global South participants, who constitute over 60 percent of the attendees. This normative architecture, reinforced year after year through government-backed institutional machinery, produces the durable influence that Track 2 platforms cannot replicate.

Conclusion

The Beijing Xiangshan Forum's 20th anniversary navigator meeting in May 2026 is not merely a diplomatic milestone; it is a barometer of China's strategic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific. By harnessing the geopolitical disruption generated by the Iran-US conflict, which has simultaneously strained American military readiness, spiked regional energy anxiety, and shifted the Southeast Asian sentiment toward Beijing, China has found an exceptionally fertile environment in which to project its image as a responsible security provider. The BXF serves as the principal institutional vehicle for cultivating and consolidating this image.

Crucially, the BXF's competitive advantage over Western-hosted forums like the Shangri-La Dialogue derives not merely from its growing size or participant diversity, but from its structural proximity to the Chinese state. Co-hosted by government-linked military institutions, the Forum enables a seamless pipeline from security dialogue to policy formulation, a translation capacity that no independent think tank can replicate. As China advances its GSI and Global Governance Initiative through the BXF's roundtables and plenary sessions, it is effectively writing the normative rulebook for an alternative regional order, one engagement at a time.

For policymakers and scholars monitoring the evolution of Asia-Pacific security architecture, the imperative is clear: Track 1.5 platforms like the BXF must be understood not as peripheral supplements to formal diplomacy, but as strategic instruments of first-order importance. China's mastery of this diplomatic tier, combining the legitimacy of governmental participation with the flexibility of informal engagement, represents one of the most consequential developments in contemporary Indo-Pacific security. As the region navigates an era of compounding crises, the Forum that convenes beneath Beijing's Fragrant Hills may well prove to be the room where its future is decided.

End Notes

- ¹ Gareth Evans, “Multilateral Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific”, *Seoul Defence Dialogue* 2021.
<https://www.gevans.org/speeches/Speech733.html>
- ² Xinhua News, “China hosts Security talks amid rising global challenges”, *Xinhua News*, 8 May 2026 Accessed on 12 May 2026,
<https://english.news.cn/20260508/3db6b386a1ab4cf8a3a09d9fcc1026eb/c.html>
- ³ CGTN, “China hosts Security talks amid rising global challenges”, *CGTN*, 8 May 2026 Accessed on 10 May 2026, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-05-08/China-hosts-security-governance-talks-amid-rising-global-challenges-1MYAUphYZaM/p.html>
- ⁴ Ryan Hass, Patricia M. Kim, Yun Sun, Dennis Wilder and Thomas Wright, “Beijing’s approach to the Conflict in Iran and its implications for China”, *Brookings Institution*, 5 May 2025. Accessed on 12 May 2026,
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/beijings-approach-to-the-conflict-in-iran-and-its-implications-for-china/>
- ⁵ ISEAS Report, “The State of Southeast Asia: 2026 Survey Report”, *Yusof Isak Institute*, 2026.
<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/frontpage-featured/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2026-survey-report/>
- ⁶ Cheng Sihao, Shang Xiaomin and Xing Yang, “Beijing Xiangshan Forum Navigator Meeting 2026 Kicks off”, *China Military*, 8 May 2026, accessed on 12 May 2026,
<http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/2025xb/B/16459326.html>
- ⁷ Haizhen Zheng, “The Beijing Xiangshan Forum promotes solutions to global security governance challenges”, *CGTN*, 17 Sep 2025, accessed on 12 May 2026,
https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/gsi/2025-09/17/content_118084541.shtml
- ⁸ Jeffrey Cimmino & Barry Pavel, “Four Scenarios for Geopolitics After the Iran War”, *Atlantic Council*, 17 Apr 2026, accessed on 10 May 2026,
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/four-scenarios-for-geopolitics-after-the-iran-war/>
- ⁹ Keith Lee, “From Dialogue to Directive: How the Xiangshan Forum Became China’s Classroom for Global Governance”, *The Economy Review*, 12 Dec 2025, accessed on 12 May 2026,
<https://economy.ac/review/2025/12/202512285179>
- ¹⁰ Bo Zhou, “The Importance of Xiangshan Forum for Beijing”, *China-US Focus*, 21 Oct 2019, accessed on 13 May 2026. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/the-importance-of-xiangshan-forum-for-beijing>
- ¹¹ Edward Schwark “The Xiangshan Forum and Asia’s ‘New Security Architecture’”, *Royal United Services Institute*, 27 Oct 2025, accessed on 12 May 2026, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/xiangshan-forum-and-asias-new-security-architecture>

Bhagyashree Nimbalkar is a research scholar at the Centre of East Asian Studies (China Division), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Currently, she is an Exchange Scholar at Fudan University, Shanghai. Her research interests revolve around Chinese foreign policy, security studies, and Innovation Economics.

Article uploaded on 27-05-2026

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he belongs to or of the USI of India.