

THE FUTURE OF IRAN-CHINA RELATIONS: AN ALLIANCE OR PURE COOPERATION?

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Introduction

Iran and China are among nations that are dissatisfied with their position in the present international system. Both countries are criticized severely by the United States for the violation of human rights in their respective countries. They wish to change their present situation since they believe they deserve a better place in the international community. However, China leaders see the world as an opportunity but the Iranian leaders as a threat. Some common outlooks have led to an interdependence of trade cooperation of the two countries. China acquires a portion of its energy needs from Iran and the latter turned into the greatest market in the Middle East for Chinese goods during the sanction era. Although such

goods have been affordable, their quality has been constantly criticized by Iranians. Both this issue and China's fairly positive record in the past, compared to Russia, England, France and the US, have raised the question of turning Iran-China ordinary relations to a strategic level in the Iranian political circles. Some deem China a future world power and emphasize the importance of a close relationship with that country while some others demand a closer relationship with the EU in future. Nevertheless, both groups agree that China played a key role in Iran's passage during the excruciating Western-imposed sanctions.¹ Therefore, serious

¹ Scott, W. Harold; Nader, Ali Reza, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations* / Center for Middle East Public Policy, International Programs at Rand, 2012. P. 9.

consideration of the future of the two countries makes sense. However, the question is this: Can Iran-China relations be promoted to a higher level in the Iran-P5+1 post-nuclear-deal era? This study contends that despite ground for common cooperation between the two countries, there are numerous constraints for a promotion of the level of relations and hence it is highly improbable that such a change will take place. We will address this issue after an initial investigation of the historical background of the two countries' relations as well as their economic, nuclear, and political mutual ties.

The historical background of Iran-China relations

The relations between the two countries are centuries old. Iran and China enjoy the heritage of human civilizations and the two ancient empires have had especial relations with each other since time immemorial. During the Achaemenid (c 550-331 B.C.) and Sassanid (A.D. 226-651) dynasties Iran had close relations with China via Silk Road.² The relations in later centuries continued until the present time with ebbs and flows. Today, the idea of a "New Silk Road," an intertwined set of economic integration initiatives seeking to link East and Central Asia, has appeal in Iran and China – for very different reasons. Under the program, announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, China aims to invest in infrastructure projects including railways and power grids in Central, West and Southern Asia, as well as Africa and Europe (See Map 1). Ali Tayebnia, the Iranian Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, that who participated the 'New Silk Road' summit in Beijing on May 14-15 2017 described it as "a cause for improving and strengthening the ties between the countries situated on this historical belt".³ He called Iran and China "two strategic partners, whose bilateral ties are expanding

and the idea to revive the historical road can add a new chapter to bilateral cooperation."⁴

Map 1

One Belt, One Road program



Source: Wikipedia Commons

In modern times, Iran and China, the two great empires in the past, gradually fell into decline since they could not adapt themselves with the time. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were victims of western imperialism and thus the relations between the two countries ebbed away. When they started the process of the restoration of their power and position, they developed their relations. In the past three decades and in fact since the start of the reform and opening up policy, China's power is increasing rapidly. During this period, China became the world's third economic power and it plays a more important role on the international stage.⁵ Nowadays there are fewer strategic decisions being made at an international level without consultation with China or disregarding the country's stance on the matter. China as a developing country that has its own independent foreign policy has had common interests with other developing countries like Iran. Geographical and cultural vicinity of the two countries and the long history of their relations have made these common ties more meaningful.

The relations of the two countries in contemporary times were established in 1971. During these years China imported energy from Iran and the latter missile technology from the former. The bilateral relations, which up until 1980s did not undergo any especial

² Jun, Liu, and Lei WU. Key Issues in China-Iran Relations // *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (in Asia), 2010, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 41.

³ Economy Min. in China for 'New Silk Road' Summit // *Iran Daily*, 13 May 2017. Mode of access: <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/192658.html>

⁴ Iran Welcomes China's New Silk Road Initiative // *Tehran Times*, 13 May 2017. Mode of access: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/413378/Iran-welcomes-China-s-new-Silk-Road-initiative>

⁵ Shariatnia, Mohsen. China's Middle Eastern Policy / Center for Strategic Research, Iran's Expediency Council, 2009. P. 65.

development, entered a new era.⁶

The Islamic Revolution in Iran coincided with a radical development in China. The relations between the two countries entered a new phase upon this coincidence. The Islamic Revolution changed Iranian foreign policy and the “Neither-the-West,-Nor-the-East” slogan Iran walked in a revolutionary path. This was happening while China changed its major strategic policy from revolutionariness to development in the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978. In other words, Iran and China swapped places in the international politics. The conservative Iran, a US ally, turned into a revolutionary stronghold and the revolutionary China that once aimed at annihilating Western imperialism, adopted rationalism in its foreign policy and entered strategic allegiance with the US, the leader of the Western capitalism. The coincidence of these two events made the relations of Iran and China form basically around economic ties and ideology moved out of question.⁷

Soon after the revolution, Iran was drawn into a war with Iraq and its relations with the two superpowers, especially the US, became strained. These superpowers and other countries places arms sanctions on Iran and the pressure on Iran increased. At this juncture, China became the main supplier of weaponry to Iran.⁸ The visit of Hashemi Rafsanjani, the then Speaker of parlement, the House of Representatives, to China in July 1985 opened a new era of military cooperation in their relations. Rafsanjani narrates in his memoire that the main topic of his discussions with the Chinese officials was the purchase of weapons.

He recounts,

“We met Mr. Deng Xiaoping, the leader, and negotiated for an hour. He did not make a clear promise of a sale of weapons during the

war but show interest in economic relations since they need foreign currency. Mr. Prime Minister, Zhao Ziyang, ... came to my residence for the last meeting and farewell.... At first it was an official meeting but upon my request we had a private meeting. We talked about acquiring missiles and he gave his consent and accepted the urgency of the delivery.... The Chinese insist on the secrecy of the sales of weapons.”⁹

The very important point that Hashemi Rafsanjani mentions in his reports of his visit to China is the question of strategic allegiance with the Chinese. He writes, “Backed by the order Ayatollah Khomeini, I offered strategic allegiance with the Chinese which they welcomed.”¹⁰ This is a clear indication that Iran has given a special importance to its relations with China. The relations of the two countries which were mainly founded on military ties during the Iran-Iraq war gradually was extended to economy, civil engineering, industry, agriculture and so on.¹¹ Hashemi Rafsanjani kept on these relations at a high level in the next decade when he became the president of Iran by enjoying China’s cooperation in the reconstruction of the post-war Iran and the betterment of the shattered economy. His successor, President Khatami, too, followed the same strategy and after a few mutual visits to the capitals by the officials of the two countries, Iran inclined more on China to provide its needs so the level of trade between the two countries reached 10 billion US dollars.¹² It was during this period when the West started curbing Iran’s economic ties with the world for political reasons and sanctions were gradually placed on Iran.

During Mahmoud Ahmadinjed’s time, Iran adopted a policy referred to as “Looking to the East” in order to attract the political support of China and the former Eastern bloc. This happened when the West aimed at isolating Iran from the

⁶ Namayeshi, Alireza. A Study of Iran-China’s Relations and the Developments in the Province of Xinjiang, Events and Analyses Monthly, No. 253, The General Bureau of East Asia and Oceana in Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009. P. 85.

⁷ Shariatinia, Mohsen. Iran-China’s Decisive Factors // *Foreign Relations Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 35.

⁸ Zahirinejad, Mahnaz; Ghoble Vrushal. Energy Factor in China-Iran Relations // *Journal of Peace Studied*, 2010, Vol.17, No.2 & 3, p. 1.

⁹ Hashemi Rafsanjani, Akbar. Hope and Anxiety. Tehran: Bureau of the Dissemination of the Revolutions’ Knowledge, 1986. P. 161.

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 187.

¹¹ Zahirinejad, Mahnaz; Ghoble Vrushal. Energy Factor in China-Iran Relations // *Journal of Peace Studied*, 2010, Vol.17, No. 2 & 3, p. 2.

¹² Iran and China // *The Iran Primer*, 11 October 2010. Mode of access: iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-china

rest of the world through international sanctions.¹³ Among these contracts was a treaty signed by the two countries in 2008 according to which Iran allowed the Chinese government to use its revenue of the oil sale as credit for the purchase of Chinese goods. Another term of the accord obliged Iran to ensure the sale of Chinese goods on credit.¹⁴ The Rouhani administration has kept the same speed of the relations with China. Rouhani maintains:

*“Relations with China are of utmost importance as we are cooperating with China in different fields. China is willing to invest in various sections of our country. We have approved of a proposal in our government concerns the way we can get access to accounts related to oil sales which were opened in other countries including China.”*¹⁵

On January 23, 2016 the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, reached a pact, as part of 17 signed agreements, according to which China would build two nuclear power plants in southern Iran and Iran, in turn, would provide long-term supplies of oil to China. The 10-year agreement will increase the total value of trade between the two countries to \$600 billion.¹⁶ At this juncture, the relations have both capacities and constrains.

Factors affecting Iran-China relationships

There are four important issues in the relations of the two countries: 1. Cooperation in the energy sector. 2. Chinese help in the settlement of the nuclear crisis. 3. Close stance of the two countries in their foreign policies. 4. Economic relations.

¹³ Dingli, Shen. Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Test China's Wisdom // *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2006. Pp. 55-66.

¹⁴ Sajjadpour Mohamad Kazem; Shariati, Shahrouz. Iran's Premise in China-US Relations 1991-2009 // *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 2011, Vol.7, No. 2, p. 81.

¹⁵ Rouhanin, Hassan. We are Ready for Serious Dialogue with the World, 11 September 2013. Mode of access: <http://www.khabaremruz.com>

¹⁶ Samofalova, Olga. A New Era in Iranian-Chinese Relations Threatens Russian Interests, 28 January 2016. Mode of access: https://www.rbth.com/international/2016/01/28/a-new-era-in-iranian-chinese-relations-threatens-russian-interests_563003

Cooperation in the energy sector

China's rapid economic growth in the past two decades and its increasing need to energy notwithstanding its insufficient and limited sources of energy have made 'energy security' and its outlook an important issue and at the same time a main point of concern because any disruption in the flow of energy can make serious obstacles in the way of China's economic growth, the staying in power of the Communist Party, and leave long-lasting negative influences. Since 1993, China became a main importer of oil even though it was the fifth oil producer in the world. The demand of the country for energy soared from 1.4 to 3.4 million barrels per day between 1985 and 1995.¹⁷ In 2006 the demand reached 6.98 mbd and in 2009 it reached the record level of 9.96 mbpd.¹⁸ Since the time they started importing oil, the Chinese came to know that 'energy security' can be a strategic Achilles' heel especially if the US makes an attempt to use this weak point as leverage of pressure because the US surveils their imported oil rout from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. The weaker military position especially the navy makes China establish close ties with oil producing countries especially in the Persian Gulf so that its vulnerability might be diminished to the least possible degree. So it can be said that the main factor in the Chinese interest in the Persian Gulf is energy security.¹⁹ According to the prediction of the IEA, in the year 2030 China will have a share of 20% of the world's demand for energy and that will be more than the need of Japan and Europe altogether and thus surpassing the US as the greatest consumer of energy.²⁰ In the Persian Gulf region, Iran has a great capacity for the expansion of its ties with China in this area for the following reasons: 1. Iran holds the second largest oil and gas reservoir and China is becoming

¹⁷ Bin, Mohamed. China's Relations with Arabic and the Gulf. UK: Routledge-Curzon, 2002. P. 23.

¹⁸ Zahirinejad, Mahnaz; Ghoble Vrushal. Energy Factor in China-Iran Relations // *Journal of Peace Studied*, 2010, Vol.17, No.2 & 3, pp. 1-12.

¹⁹ Leveret, F.; Bader, J. Managing China-U.S. Energy Competition in the Middle East // *The Washington Quarterly*, 2005, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 187-201.

²⁰ International Energy Agency, World Energy Outlook 2007. Mode of access: <http://www.iea.org/text>

the leading consumer of its energy at a fast speed. 2. Iran has a different method of the management of its energy resources than other Persian Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular and the US as China's strategic rival has no influence on Iran. 3. Long lasting sanctions imposed by the West on Iran as pressure leverage had in effect prevented western oil companies to investigate in the Iranian oil industry and this has paved the way for the presence and influence of China in Iran.²¹ Even today after the sanctions being lifted, China has a better chance of cooperation with Iran in the energy sector than other countries. Besides, China wishes to strengthen its ties with Iran in order to reinforce its presence in central Asia and reach the sources of energy in the Caspian Sea. Procurement of energy from the Caspian Sea makes China less dependent on the import of oil from the Persian Gulf states.²² It follows that China attempts to approach Iran and enjoy its energy. This was evident in 2014 when China imported 555 bpd from Iran and in March 2015 it approached 630 bpd with a 15% increase in comparison with the year before. Chinese firms were expected to buy between 3 million to 4 million barrels more Iranian oil each quarter in 2017 than the previous year. That would be about 5 to 7 % higher than the 620.000 barrels per day (bpd) of Iranian crude oil the country exported during the first 11 months of 2016.²³ Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, the Iranian Oil Minister, in his visit to China in 2015 declared that he had negotiations regarding the investment of the Chinese firms in the Iranian oil and gas industries as well as the increase of oil export to China.²⁴ Regarding post-sanctions economic relations with China he added, "China will remain a strategic partner to us.... Even after

the sanctions are lifted up, we will continue our cooperation with countries that kept friendly relations with us during the sanctions." At the present time, Chinese oil firms are reviewing their contracts in order to increase the import of oil and investment in the Iranian oil and gas industries. Sinopec signed a development deal for the Yadavaran field in late 2007 with CNPC signing a deal for the North Azadegan field in 2009, after Japanese and European companies pulled out of the projects, both in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan, due to sanctions over Iran's nuclear program. Both fields started pumping oil in early 2016, with North Azadegan reaching full production in the third quarter and Yadavaran in the fourth quarter, and they are currently pumping at around 160.000 bpd.²⁵ Some researchers like Joel Wuthnow express the lifting of United Nations (UN) and U.S. nuclear-related sanctions will increase opportunities for Chinese firms to invest in and trade with Iran. In anticipation of sanctions relief, Chinese NOCs such as Sinopec and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) are expected to increase production in Iran, contributing to a rise in oil output.²⁶

Iran's nuclear crisis and the 5+1

China did participate actively in development of Iran's nuclear program from 1990-1996, training Iranian nuclear scientists, building the research nuclear reactor in Isfahan, providing Iran with enriched uranium and dual use technology, etc. but in 1997, under severe pressure by Americans; it withdrew from the program.²⁷ In the IAEA, China had the alternative of bilateral cooperation with Iran or supporting the Non-Proliferation Treaty and at the same time keeping relations with Iran. It went for the latter.²⁸ Nevertheless, the Chinese

²¹ Wei, Qiu; Xuan, Zuo. China Sweats Iran Trade Tie // *Global Times*, 30 September 2009. Mode of access: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/473474.shtml>

²² Dario, . China and Iran Strengthen their bilateral Relationship, 8 October 2006. Mode of access: <http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/China-Iran/Cristiani-Dario/China-and-Iran-Strengthen-their-Bilateral-Relationship>

²³ Aizhu, Chen. China's Iran Oil Imports to Hit Record on New Production // *Reuters*, 5 Jan 2017. Mode of access: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-oil-idUSKBN14P15W>

²⁴ Alai, Nassim. Oil Export on the Line of Agreement // *Donyaye Eghtesad Daily*, No. 3470, 29 April 2015.

²⁵ Aizhu, Chen. China's Iran Oil Imports to Hit Record on New Production // *Reuters*, 5 Jan 2017. Mode of access: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-oil-idUSKBN14P15W>

²⁶ SIPRI Arms Transfer Database. Mode of access: www.sipri.org

²⁷ Medeiros, S. Reluctant Restraint: The Evolution of China's Non Proliferation Policies and Practices, 1980-2004. Palo Alto, Ca: Stanford University Press, 2007. P. 11.

²⁸ Dingli, Shen. Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Test China's Wisdom // *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2006.

officials constantly reiterated the peaceful settlement of the nuclear crisis but in the long run they backed the referral of Iran's nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council.²⁹ They reasoned that they supported the act because IAEA was the sole authority to investigate the matter and the stepping in of the Security Council is merely to help solve the matter not to take the charge of the dossier. Despite all this, China voted in favor of the passage of the UN resolution on 31 June, 2006 whereby Iran was given a 30-day deadline to suspend activities related to nuclear enrichment. China's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson commented on China's decision that they hope that the resolution would be in line with diplomatic attempts in Iran's nuclear issue.³⁰ Ever since, China backed a number of the UN resolutions urging "Iran must stop uranium enrichment activities." Based on this, one can take China as a partner to the US. However, China showed reservation in implementing the resolutions. The Chinese diplomacy regarding the resolutions was based on the following: the diminishing of the negative effects on Iran's activities, considering them as non-abiding for China and more importantly the resolutions must not disrupt Iran's production and export of energy or the Chinese investment in that sector. While owing to the sanctions, European and East Asian firms abstained from any trade with Iran, Chinese firms did not miss the opportunities in Iran. Thus, up until 2010 on paper China had already become the main foreign investor in the Iranian oil sector.³¹ China tried to help the nuclear negotiations get along in Vienna in 2015 and bring close together the views of different parties. The public opinion in Iran, however, has been critical of China's stance toward the nuclear dossier in comparison with China's role in the Syrian crisis. Nevertheless, compared with Western negotiators they believe China has had a more constructive role. Iran hopes that the two countries continue their

cooperation especially in nuclear technology in the post-agreement era.

*Iran-China's close views
in foreign diplomacy*

Iran and China share close views in their international policies both on regional and international level. On a regional level both regard the rise of IS as a real threat in the spread of extremism and terrorism and stress confronting them. Although unlike Iran, China does not take part in fighting IS in the battlefronts in Iraq and Syria but compared to other Western countries it does not criticize Iranian stance in these two countries. Both Iran and China stress a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis through diplomacy and by Syrian people. China has voted against four UN resolutions on Syria and thus in effect is coming close to Iran's stance against any military solution in the settlement of the crisis. Part of this opposition is related to the importance China gives to the sovereignty of countries. To China as to Iran sovereignty in its traditional and absolute sense is of great significance.³² Therefore, excuses like human rights violation should not provide ground for the breach of the sovereignty of countries. Iran and China, adopting this common policy, endeavor to stop what they call the opportunism of the US in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria for human rights reasons. Nonetheless, both countries are charged with the same problem of the violation of human rights by American officials and believe that the allegations are politically motivated. So they slam such allegations. But what highlights the relations of China and Iran more than anything else is both countries' stance on international system and its future. Iran and China are among countries that demand a review of the present state of the distribution of power in the international system and are not happy with their positions. However, Iran voices its dissatisfaction more openly and radically than China. These views have had ebbs and flows in the past three decades. At the beginning of the revolution and during the Ahmadinejad administration the stance has been very radical while during the presidencies of Rafsanjani, Khatami, and now Rouhani the views have been more moderate.

²⁹ Jun, Liu, and Lei WU. Key Issues in China-Iran Relations // *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (in Asia), 2010, Vol.4, No.1, p. 52.

³⁰ Iran / *IRNA News Agency*, 21 July 2006.

³¹ Katzman, . The Iran Sanction Act / *CRS Report for Congress*, renowned RS 20871, 12 October 2007. Mode of access: <http://www.fas.org/sgq-crs/row/rs 2008.7.1.pdf>

³² Krasner, S. *Sovereignty*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

In either case, Iran shares China's concern about American hegemony in the world as a threat against its own national security and calls for multi polarization of the international system. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an organization in which both parties as well as Russia attempt to adopt and follow their own multilateral views in the international system. Although Iran is an SCO observer but is trying to use the influence of China to contain the presence of the US in the region. The final declaration of the SCO summit in 2005 which stresses the leaving of the US military forces from the region is a concrete example of the alignment of the two countries' stance.³³ Yet, China has recently refused to consider making Iran a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China is looking first at her own national interest. Beijing is not interested to transform the SCO into an anti-western organization. SCO is indeed a very useful soft-balancing tool against the US, but not organization for direct confrontation with Washington.

Economic relations of Iran and China

Iran and China have had relations in the past four decades but they were never as warm as today. This is related, more than anything else, to the Western and especially US and EU sanctions against Iran. The cutting off of the diplomatic relations of Iran and the US and the start of the Iran-Iraq war opened a new economic opportunity before China and over time the volume and variety of this opportunity expanded. The trade between Iran and China grew basically in two areas of general trade and oil and gas industry. The level of trade between Iran and China was 400 million dollars in 1994 but in 2008 it reached the record level of 29 billion dollars. At the present time, China is Iran's main trade partner in Asia and the third greatest partner in the world.³⁴ In terms of the export of goods to Iran, China is the second exporter while in 1984 it was the fifth greatest exporting country to Iran. The statistics from the Iranian Customs show that Iran's import

reach 38.5 billion dollars. 9.189 billion dollars (24%) of the imports were from the UAE and 8.978 billion dollars (23.3%) were from China. In total, about 18.2 billion dollars (over 47%) of Iran's total import is from these the two countries. But the fact is that the presence of Chinese goods is way beyond the above figures since part of Chinese goods is re-exported to Iran via UAE.³⁵ Adding this to the goods China directly exports to Iran, it becomes exporter number one to Iran. According to the IMF, in 2014, Iran has exported 24.968 billion US dollars to China and Imported 26.772 billion US dollars from China. It represents 28.99% of all Iranian Exports and 27.77 of all her imports.³⁶

China regards Iran as a permanent partner for its exports and a source of its ever increasing need for energy. Iran obtains a considerable income from its export of oil and gas to China. That's the reason why A.A. Salehi, the former FM, regards the two countries as complementary to each other's needs and maintained, "They [the Chinese] have the industry and we have the source of energy."³⁷

Two Countries have warm Cooperation on Chia's new Silk Road initiative, also known as the "One Belt, One Road" program. As Gautam Adhikari, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington DC describes Iran is "a vital link" on China's New Silk Road Initiative. He believes that "Iran's strategic location and its capacity to supply oil and gas to China are important reasons why Iran is a key point of the "One Belt, One Road' or OBOR. A train line is now operational between Chain's east coast and Tehran. It has slashed time between Shanghai and Tehran to just two weeks compared to the 45 days it takes for goods to be ferried by sea between Shanghai and Bandar Abbas."³⁸

Apart from trade and consumers' goods, a military relation with China is of great importance to Tehran. To Iran, China remains a serious

³³ Declaration of Heads of Member States of SCO, 2006. Mode of access: <http://english.secosummit2006.org>, accessed 20 November 2015

³⁴ Iran, China trade links // *Tehran Times*, 11 May, 2009.

³⁵ China Firms in Iran Providing Strategic and Infrastructure Support // *World Tribune*, 31 August 2007. Mode of access: www.worldtribune.com

³⁶ IMF. Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook, 2015.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Heirannia, Javad. "Iran is a 'Vital Link' on Silk Road: Expert" // *Tehran Times*, 12 September, 2016, Mode of access: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/406287/Iran-is-a-vital-link-on-Silk-Road-expert>

option to purchase weaponry even in the post-nuclear-deal era. Iran will never forget the role of China in selling 5 billion dollars weapons in the war with Iraq and regards Chinese weaponry as substitutes for Western one to guarantee Iran's security at hard times.³⁹ Statistics show that after Pakistan, Iran is the second main purchaser of Chinese weaponry in the years 2005-2009.⁴⁰ It is believed that most of these purchases have been for missiles which are estimated between 4-10 billion dollars.⁴¹ Notwithstanding the uplifting of the Missile sanctions against Iran after the nuclear deal, it is expected that this division of the relations secretly continue as before. *Table 1* identifies how the nuclear deal would affect sales of the systems supplied by China to Iran in the decade prior to the imposition of the 2010 sanctions.

Table 1

Chinese Arms Sales and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Impact

System	Description	Range	Years of Deliveries	Sales Under JCPOA
C-802	Anti-ship missile	120 km	1994-2012	Requires UNSC approval for first 8 years; no restrictions thereafter
Type-86	APC	N/A	1997-2011	Requires UNSC approval for first 8 years; no restrictions thereafter
TL-10/FL-8	Anti-ship missile	18 km	2002	Permitted (maximum range under 25 km)
C-704	Anti-ship missile	45 km	2003	Requires UNSC approval for first 8 years; no restrictions thereafter
C-801	Anti-ship missile	40 km	2004	Requires UNSC approval for first 8 years; no restrictions thereafter
QW-11	Portable surface-to-air missile	5 km	2005	Requires UNSC approval for first 8 years; no restrictions thereafter

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database.
Mode of access: www.sipri.org

In general, renewed sales of most of these systems would require UNSC approval, though provision of short-range missiles such as the FL-8 would likely be permitted without waiver.

The partial lifting of sanctions on Iran following the nuclear agreement with the U.S. seems to be helping Iran-China economic cooperation; EU nations are still somewhat wary of vigorously expanding economic ties with Iran but China is not. Iran and China have

set the ambitious goal of increasing bilateral trade tenfold, to \$600 billion, by 2026.⁴²

Constraints before Iran and China relations

Based on above analyses, it seems that the potential for Iran-China relations will be mainly in the energy sector and in the second place in some alignment of foreign diplomacy, and economic and arms trade. The energy sector is the most potential area in the relations of the two countries because geopolitically Iran is a key player in the energy sector and on the other hand China is the greatest consumer of energy.⁴³ In addition, Iran and China's foreign policies seem to be in alignment in some fields. Both countries stress multilateralism, will not tolerate foreign intervention in other countries' internal affairs, and make attempts to develop their position in the international hierarchy.⁴⁴ These common interests can make the political relations of the two countries more meaningful. The strategic choice of China and its special relations with great powers including the US and the EU on one hand and Iran's criticism of the structure of the international system on the other make the two countries' relations face considerable constraints.⁴⁵ Since economic ties are of great importance to China and a great deal of these ties are with the US and EU, the country has to consider these countries' concerns regarding Iran.⁴⁶ The notion of coordination with the international system is a special priority in China's foreign policy. Thus China

³⁹ Carter, H.; Ehteshami, A. *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*. London: Routledge, 2004.

⁴⁰ Swaine, M.D. *Beijing's Tight trope Walk on Iran // China Leadership Monitor*, 2010, Vol. 3. Mode of access: <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/clms.pdf>

⁴¹ Scott, W. Harold; Nader, Ali Reza, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations / Center for Middle East Public Policy*, International Programs at Rand, 2012. P. 7.

⁴² *China, Iran Agree to Expand Trade to \$600 Billion in a Decade // Bloomberg*, 23 January, 2016, Mode of access :www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-0

⁴³ Miraskari, S.R.; Tayebi S.K.; Barzani M.V. *An Analysis of International Outsourcing in Iran-China Trade Relations // Journal of Money and Economy*, 2013, Vol.8, No. 1, pp. 109-139.

⁴⁴ Peimani, Hooman. *China and Iran: Energy Security Cooperation, But not Much More // East Asian Policy*, 2011, p. 131.

⁴⁵ Scott, W. Harold; Nader, Ali Reza, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations / Center for Middle East Public Policy*, International Programs at Rand, 2012. P. 21.

⁴⁶ Zahirinejad, Mahnaz; Ghoble Vrushal. *Energy Factor in China-Iran Relations // Journal of Peace Studied*, 2010, Vol.17, No.2 & 3, p. 8.

exerts efforts to expand constructive relations with the world's superpowers and hence materialize this coordination. The future of the international system is not insignificant to China but it is pursuing its own goals within the system and in cooperation with superpowers. Thus China's attempt to cooperate with the transitory international system and Iran's defiant approach towards this system has produced significant obstacles on the two countries' relations. Thus it can be argued that Iran's approach towards the West and the US in particular influences Iran-China political relations though the economic ties are less affected.⁴⁷

Chinese leaders are cognizant of these concerns and attempt to maintain a picture of theirs as a responsible power in theory and in practice.⁴⁸ This power might not be happy with some international institutions but is not aiming at a revolutionary eradication of these institutions either. Besides, the country has accepted certain norms of the international society to both ensure other countries especially the US about the consequences of its gaining power and preserve the international arena as a suitable environment for its growth and development. The theorization of the peaceful rise of a power as a dominating notion in the Chinese foreign diplomacy is the result of such an outlook toward the international system and China's place in it as well. The publication of the white paper of the State Council Information Office on 22 December 2005 entitled *China's Peaceful Development Road* shows that China is determined on establishment of a peaceful international setting for the advancement of its development on the one hand and maintaining the global peace on the other. Peace and the open-door policy, cooperation and coordination, and win-win policy are among fundamental principles of this document.⁴⁹ The

same stance is repeated in another document that the Chinese State Council released in September 2011.⁵⁰ Apart from above considerations we must pay attention to important factors as constraints to Iran and China relations: the Israel Factor (China has very important relations with Tel Aviv: trade, technology, military technology,...) and Arab Factor, specially the relation between Beijing and Riyadh (and Gulf Monarchies) which are very important for China. In 2014, in terms of exports the first partner of China in the Middle East was the UAE, followed by Iran and Saudi Arabia but Beijing import more from the Saudi Kingdom than from the Islamic Republic of Iran (48.679 billion US Dollars versus 27.465)⁵¹ also total China-Saudi trade is 70.271 million US\$ versus total China-Iranian trade: 51.803.⁵² Also, Although President Xi Jinping during his January 22-23, 2016 visit to Iran confidently pledged to promote trade ties to the value of \$600 billion in ten years but as Scott explains it is "Exaggerated Ambition." He argues:

*"\$600 billion is approximately 33% larger than the current size of Iran's economy, which was valued at \$406.3 billion by the World Bank in 2014. The Five-Year Plan the Iranian Parliament is aiming for an average 8% growth rate. Similarly, the World Bank projects that Iran's real G.D.P. should rise to 5.8% and 6.7% in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Therefore, under ideal conditions, if one was to take the optimal growth rate of 8% at a constant rate for ten years, the size of Iran's economy would amount to \$876.52 billion, approximately, in 2025. Thus, the \$600 billion bilateral trade target would roughly equate to two-thirds of Iran's G.D.P. a decade from now."*⁵³

access: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Dec/152669.html>

⁵⁰ Information Office of the State Council / China's Peaceful Development, September 2011, Mode of access: http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.html

⁵¹ Daojiong, Zha; Meidan, Michal. China and the Middle East in a New Energy Landscape. Asia Programme, Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, October 2015.

⁵² Scott, Emma. Defying Expectations: China's Iran Trade and Investments, 6 April 2016. Mode of access: <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/defying-expectations-china%E2%80%99s-iran-trade-investments>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Scott, W. Harold. Opportunistic Cooperation under Constraints: Non-Proliferation, Energy Trade, and the Evolution of Chinese Policy towards Iran // *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2015, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 59-81.

⁴⁸ Marybeth, Davis et al. China-Iran A Limited Partnership, Prepared for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Centre Technology, Inc, 2013. P. 18.

⁴⁹ White Paper on Peaceful Development Road Published. 22 December 2005. Mode of

The future of Iran-China relations?

In order for the formation of an alliance between two countries it is necessary that in addition to the national and international potential, the geopolitical and geostrategic position, one the following conditions should exist between the two countries otherwise, the mutual relations will be, in the best possible state, an ordinary cooperation:

According to Michael Barnett and Jack Levy, in order to establish a strategic relation it is necessary that either of the parties – here the weaker state – face a legitimacy crisis and need a foreign ally in order to guarantee its internal security.⁵⁴ Iran's present condition indicates that there is no serious domestic threat to the country apart from some terrorist and disintegrating activities and from the legitimacy perspective it is in a favorable condition. In the event of a threat, China's non-interference policy in other countries' internal affairs shows that it cannot be a reliable strategic ally for Iran from this perspective and the country is not in principle interested in following Iran's internal affairs such as the unrests in 2009.⁵⁵

Another aspect of threats to national security which lead to the alliance of two countries is foreign threats. In this respect, Martin White stipulates that the function of alliances is the reinforcement of the security of allies and the promotion of their interests in outside world.⁵⁶ George Liska believes that because of inability in confrontation with powerful enemies, countries decide to join forces with other countries that in the same boat in order to increase their power to face threats.⁵⁷ Although the basis and the logic of this notion lies in Morgenthau's views and the theory of the

balance of power,⁵⁸ later theorist like Stephan Walt find "the balance of threat" as a substitute for the "balance of power."⁵⁹ Nonetheless, even though Iran has been militarily constantly threatened by the US and Israel, there are a few factors that will not allow the consideration of Iran and China's relations as strategic. First Iran is believed to possess military deterrent power and constantly speaks of a response to make any offensive state repent.⁶⁰ Secondly, because China is not yet a stabilized superpower it is not willing to confront the US and its ally, Israel. Therefore, China prefers to remain neutral rather than taking Iran's side. Thirdly, China itself is faced with numerous problems on a domestic level such as the Moslems in the province of Xinjiang and Tibetan separatists and also on a regional level like the problems with Japan, Taiwan and India.

Based on exchange theory, the quantity and quality of political, economic and cultural exchanges between states play significant roles in the formation of an alliance between them. Steven Spiegel and Louis Cantori are among these theorists who believe the more the volume of trade between states, the more convergence between them.⁶¹ As stated earlier, Iran and China have good trade level but as there are factors in the way to prevent the formation of a strategic alliance between them in future. Firstly, according to Spiegel and Louis Cantori theory, there is no similarity between the economic structures and also the degree of development of the two countries. Secondly, the volume of trade of Iran with China barely exceeds 0.5% of the latter's foreign trade while the volume of trade with the US is 20% of China's foreign trade. Even the volume of trade between China and Iran's enemy, Israel, is constantly rising and there is a 40% average annual growth of the trade between the two and in 2008 have hit the record

⁵⁴ Barnett, Michael; Levy, Jack. Alliance Formation, Domestic Political Economy and Third World Security // *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 1992, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp.19-40.

⁵⁵ Scott, W. Harold; Nader, Ali Reza. China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations / Center for Middle East Public Policy, International Programs at Rand, 2012. P. 6.

⁵⁶ Wight, Martin. Power Politics. New York: Holmes & Maier, 1978. P. 122.

⁵⁷ Liska, George. Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962. P. 13.

⁵⁸ Morgenthau, Hans. Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. New York: Knopf, 1985. P. 263.

⁵⁹ Walt, Stephan. The Origins of Alliances. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. P. 263.

⁶⁰ Bagheri Dowlatabadi, Ali. Deterrence Element in Iran's Military Strategy // *Defense Policy Quarterly*, 2013, Vol. 22, No. 85, pp. 28-56.

⁶¹ Cantori, Louis; Spiegel, Steven. The International Politics of Region: A Comparative Approach. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005. Pp. 10-11.

level of 5.1 billion dollars.⁶² The idea that China abandons its trade with Israel and the US owing to a possible strategic alliance with Iran makes no sense. Then it can be concluded that in the best feasible way, Iran can be a mere provider of China's energy and a consuming market for its goods. Thirdly, at best only sanctions related to Iran's nuclear activities will be lifted but the ones related to the human rights violations, sale of arms, support of terrorism, etc. will stay in force. So, the two parties will have constraints even in their trade relations and there is no horizon of these relations exceeding a certain level.

Some theorists like Barry Buzan and Ole Waever believe non-material factors like historical identities and ideological and identity affinities are helpful in the formation of friendly or unfriendly relations.⁶³ Michael Barnett supports this theory. He finds intellectual and ideological affinities as important factors in the formation of Bagdad Treaty in 1955 or identity considerations in foundation of Persian Gulf Cooperative Council.⁶⁴ Seeing Iran-China relations from this perspective, one can easily see radical differences between Iran's Shia beliefs, patriotic tendencies, and ultra-patriotic ambitions and China's outlook on and place in the international system. Unlike Iran, China simply thinks of material interests and does not pursue communist cultural and value concerns beyond its boundaries. They attempt to develop their economy by blending nationalism, Marxism and Chinese production style. So they do not endeavor to disrupt the international structure in the short term or do not engage in a war of words with the US on issues like the spread of American values in the world or the preference

justice to order in the world management.⁶⁵ They would rather maintain their role as a responsible stakeholders in the international society but Iran still pursues the export of its revolution to countries in region such as Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon.⁶⁶

Another Problem for developing of Iran-China Relations is Beijing-Riyadh's Relations. China has shown a specific interest in Saudi Arabia due to the importance of oil. Beijing has signed the Strategic Oil Cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1999, which laid the foundation for Saudi Arabia to become and remain China's largest oil supplier. Because of that, China has invested and attempted to influence the Saudis to be more conducive to Chinese industry. One example is China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation's (SINOPEC)

Meeting with Saudi Aramco to discuss a stake in a \$1.2-billion refinery in the Chinese city of Qingdao. The two sides further joined hands in a \$3.5-billion venture in Fujian province that included greater refinery capacity.⁶⁷ Despite this rapid growing trade between the two countries, if we exclude the importance of Saudi oil exports, the total volume of trade between Saudi Arabia and China constitutes less than 1.5% of China's total foreign trade. On the other hand, we find that the Saudi trade with China accounted for around 14% of Saudi Arabia's total foreign trade.⁶⁸ Sean Foley believed, that

"For Saudis, who had grown tired of their relationship with the United States, China appeared to be the alternative they had been seeking for years. In less than a decade, the

⁶² Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics Report, 2009. Mode of access: www.cbs.gov.il/engindex

⁶³ Buzan, B.; Waever, O. *Regions and Powers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Cantori, Louis; Spiegel, Steven. *The International Politics of Region: A Comparative Approach*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.

⁶⁴ Barnett, Michael. *Identity and Alliance in the Middle East* / in Peter Katzenstein, Ed, *The Culture of National Security, Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

⁶⁵ Meredith, R. *The Elephant and The Dragon: The Rise of India and China and What It Means for All of Us*. New York: Norton, 2007.

⁶⁶ Reeves, Jeffrey. *Chinese Perspectives on Sino-Iran Relations* // *Small Wars Journal*, 2015, Vol. 9. Mode of access: www.smallwarsjournal.com

⁶⁷ Varij Kazemi, Abbas. *China and the Middle East: More Than Oil* // *The European Financial Review*, 2014. Mode of access: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Xiangming_Chen/publication/277816073_China_and_the_Middle_East_More_Than_Oil/links/5574b0fb08aeb6d8c01945b6.pdf, March 2014

⁶⁸ Bingbing, Wu. *China is More Important to Saudi Arabia than Vice Versa* / Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011, Mode of access: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ASIA%20Program_China%20and%20the%20PG.pdf#page=19

Asian nation [China] had emerged as one of Saudi Arabia's primary trading partners. And it had the potential to be the Kingdom's new strategic partner, and a long history of cultural ties to the Arab and Muslim worlds, including Saudi Arabia."⁶⁹

This condition indicates that Saudi Arabia could be the one who is courting the Chinese market and China will not side with Tehran in the latter's ongoing political disputes with Riyadh, Tel Aviv, or Baghdad. China's continued regional balancing act was on display in advance of Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in January 2016, in which Beijing balanced closer ties with Tehran with improved relations with Arab states.

Although Iran and China have a common opinion on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries like Syria but two countries follow their own solutions for ending the crisis. While Chinese policymakers have implicitly questioned Iran-Russia's commitment to a multilateral political solution to the Syrian conflict, both Iran and Russia have military presence in Syria. Some researchers like Ramani believe that "China desire to bolster its international status among anti-Western authoritarian regimes and potentially challenge Russia's role as the leading normative counterweight to American hegemony in the Middle East."⁷⁰ Therefore, while China has refused to militarily intervene in Syria alongside Iranian forces, its indirect pro-Assad actions have helped entrench Tehran as a vital Chinese ally in the Middle East. However, Iran expects China to play a serious role in the Syrian crisis and use its capacity for realizing peace in the Middle East.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper shows that Iran and China's relations will continue in future due to both parties' needs for energy, trade

and mutual concerns in foreign diplomacy but there is little likelihood that these relations are promoted to a strategic level. China follows the model of peaceful rise in the international system and is not willing to dispute with Western countries and the US in particular over Iran. Therefore, whenever it is at a fork it will go for the US rather than Iran. This is evident in the case of the UN resolutions against Iran. It seems Iranian officials have come this understanding that they cannot rely on China as a trustworthy shield against pressures by the West so they prefer to solve their issues with them first through diplomatic negotiations and then through coordination of their policies with Russia and economic stance with China. Also, China's relations with Iran do not differ greatly from China's relations with other Middle Eastern countries. In General, bilateral China- Iran Relations are not as intense as the impression often given by Western media reports.

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⁶⁹ Foley, Sean. New Ally for Saudi Arabia, 2016. Mode of access: <http://www.seanfoley.org/sites/default/files/foley.pdf>, 2016

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БУДУЩЕЕ ОТНОШЕНИЙ ИРАНА И КИТАЯ: АЛЬЯНС ИЛИ ПРОСТО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО?

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<p>Информация о статье: <i>Поступила в редакцию:</i> 14 июля 2017 <i>Принята к печати:</i> 11 декабря 2017</p>	<p>Аннотация: Будущее политических внешних связей Ирана с другими государствами и особенно с Китаем после подписания ядерного соглашения занимает особое место во внешнеполитической повестке администрации Рухани. Несмотря на некоторые трудности, с которыми были сопряжены связи Ирана и Китая в последние годы, они, тем не менее, оставались на порядок интенсивнее, чем отношения Ирана со странами Запада. По этой причине переход от обычного сотрудничества к стратегическим отношениям между Ираном и Китаем привлекает серьезное внимание в политических кругах Ирана. Сторонники такой трансформации обращают внимание на нынешнее и будущее положение Китая в международном обществе, а также его конструктивную роль во время санкций, введенных Западом против Ирана. Противники ссылаются на более китайские технологии (более низкого качества, чем технологии западных конкурентов), и на противоречивость позиции Китая в отношении Ирана во время принятия международных санкций. В настоящей статье дается оценка возможностей углубления связей двух стран в будущем, а также вероятных препятствий на этом пути.</p>
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<p>Ключевые слова: Иран; Китай; энергия; альянс; сотрудничество; США; дипломатия</p>	

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