

# China's Policy Options towards Iran

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**Abstract:** *Chinese kept good relations with Persians in history. The two peoples began their intercourse more than two thousand years ago. Nowadays, oil, trade, North-western China's security and international support are factors pushing Beijing to cooperate with Teheran. On the other hand, the US and other countries have paid more attention to Sino-Iranian relations, and these relations have encountered several troubles. At present there are several arguments in China on policy options toward Iran, for example, to continue a pro-Iran policy; to support the US policy; to sit on the fence or stand by. China's dynamic Iran policy may be affected by some new factors in the future, such as China's self-position and other (major) Powers' attitudes toward China.*

**Key Words:** *China; Iran; Middle East Policy*

In China, Sino-Iranian relations and China's Iran policy are popular but sensitive issue. On one hand, scholars have a heated debate at almost all symposiums concerning Iran, and many ordinary Chinese people are also interested in this issue. On the other hand, in major Chinese public media and academic journals, we can hardly see articles criticizing Iran, let alone finding clear and serious China's policies against Iran.

That Iran has been discussed so widely in China proves it is a

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controversial issue. Of course, we can easily conclude that there must be several different opinions or advice on China's Iran policy. But in fact it is not easy to find such articles in major Chinese media and academic journals. This article discusses China's Iran policy based on my understandings as a Chinese scholar. In my view, for a good understanding of this issue, it is very necessary to know the past Sino-Persian relations. This article begins with a historical perspective.

## **I. A Brief History of Sino-Persian Relations**

In history, China kept good relations with Persia. The two peoples began their intercourse more than two thousand years ago. In order to seek military cooperation against the dangerous enemy Xiongnu (Hun), Zhang Qian, a Chinese official in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), was dispatched twice during 138-115 BC to visit the Western Region (Central Asia). He visited the neighboring countries of Bactria and Sogdiana in 126 BC, made the first known Chinese report on Persian Parthia. In his accounts, Parthia is named "Ānxī". More than 200 years later, Ban Chao, a courageous Han general governing Northwest China sent his subordinate Gan Ying to Da Qin (the Roman Empire) in 97 AD. The Chinese military ambassador Gan Ying reached the Parthian coast of the Persian Gulf. During the Wei and Jin Period (265–420 AD) and Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD 420–589). Even in the Sui Dynasty (589–618 AD), China's northern frontiers were in danger of nomadic peoples' invasion. At that time, China united Sassanid to contain and attack their common enemies. After the Arab invasion, Sassanid asked the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) for assistance. The Sassanid prince and a few Persian nobles fled to China too. Though China did not send army to confront the Arabs, both the prince and his son were given high titles at the Chinese court. Emperor Gaozong of Tang also allowed the Persian refugees fleeing from the Arab conquest to settle in China.

Besides military contacts, there were more trade, business and cultural exchanges between China and Persia. As early as the Han dynasty, the well-known Silk Road found its prelude. From then on, the Silk Road has linked ties of friendship between China and the outer world including Persia. Following Zhang Qian's missions and report, commercial relations between China and west Asia including Parthia gradually flourished and more Chinese missions were sent there. Apparently Parthian would like to keep a good relationship with China too. "When the Han envoy visited the kingdom of Anxi (Parthia) for the first time, the king of Anxi dispatched 20,000 horsemen to meet them on the eastern border of the kingdom.... When the Han envoys set out again to return to China, the king of Anxi dispatched envoys of his own to accompany them..." (Sima, xxx 123). Parthians also played a role in the Silk Road transmission of Buddhism from Central Asia to China. A Parthian nobleman and Buddhist missionary named An Shih Kao went to the then Chinese capital Luoyang in 148 AD where he established temples and became the first man to translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese.

According to an ancient Chinese book titled *Wei Records*, there were dozens of Sassanid missions which visited China during the Wei and Jin Period. In the Tang Dynasty, communities of Persian-speaking merchants formed major trade centers in northwest China. Till Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), a large number of Central Asian and Persian soldiers, experts, and artisans were recruited. There were more and more kinds of intercourses that developed at that time and henceforth. "Chinese astronomical knowledge, printing and paper money were transmitted to Persia and the Near East, while Arabic and Persian alchemy, mathematics, Euclidean geometry, medicine and pharmacology were transmitted to China"(Garver, 2006: 14-15). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both the Chinese and Persians became the targets of foreign great powers who lost their independence. Then they had to

struggle very hard to save their countries from the hands of powerful foreigners. During this period Chinese and Persia still had the same feelings.

All in all, before the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, China had never seriously been in confrontation with Persia. The history of bilateral relations was friendship. Military cooperation, trade and business activities, and cultural exchanges made a good historical bond between China and Persian regimes. After the PRC was founded on October 1, 1949, it therefore became an ally of the Soviet Union. At that time the Shah of Iran increasingly relied on the US. Because China and Iran respectively belonged to Soviet and American camp, the Cold War once influenced Sino-Iranian relations disadvantageously. China kept pace with the Soviet Union and maintained an ideologically consistent set of policies in the early of 1950s. With the Soviet Union and British influence disappearing, especially after the 1953 Pahlavi coup, the US became the Shah's number one supporter. Following the Soviet Union, China had the favour of the Shah's opposition--the Iran's Tudeh, and criticized the Baghdad Pact Organization and its members including Iran after it was set up in 1955. On the other hand, Iran sought closer ties with Taipei and opposed Beijing's admission to the United Nations.

Fortunately there was not a long winter before the spring of Sino-Iranian relations came. After the Sino-Soviet split in late 1950s, and early 1960s, China began its completely independent foreign policy and therefore had to develop more friendly countries to confront the US and Soviet Union synchronously. Almost at the same time, with the consolidation of his power, the Shah also sought a more independent foreign policy. In the 1960s, China's "five principles of peaceful coexistence": mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence

resonated with the Shah's new diplomacy. China respectively welcomed the Shah's sisters Princesses Ashraf and Fatimah in April and May 1971. Both of them came to China to work for normalizing bilateral relations. China established diplomatic relations with Iran by a joint communiqué on August 17, 1971. The following year witnessed Empress Farah's official visit to China. Until 1978, the Sino-Iranian trade volume had already been \$118 million, about 20 times greater than in 1971.

Hua Guofeng, then the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and Prime Minister of the PRC, made an official visit to Iran from August 29 to September 1, 1978. This was of course a friendly move for the crumbling Shah. But for the leaders of the Islamic Republic, Hua's visit was absolutely a naked affront to their revolution. Just as Abbas Maleki, director of a Teheran think-tank, Caspian Institute, said, "The visit left a very strong negative feeling about China among Iranians." (Wright, 2004: November 19). Thus Sino-Iranian relations briefly suffered in the early period of the Islamic Republic.

But as mentioned earlier, the Chinese and Persians maintained a long-term history of friendship. Hua's visit was only an episode for the Sino-Iranian relations. From the early 1980s both Iran and China liked to establish good bilateral relations. The Iranian war with Iraq, the sanctions imposed by Western countries and the serious nuclear crisis has forced Islamic Republic to approach China. For Iranian leaders, who have been condemned by Western countries, especially the United States, almost from the founding of the Islamic Republic, it is an ideal choice to cooperate with one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988 provided China a new opportunity to participate in much-needed economic reconstruction. In 1989, the then Iranian President Ali Khamenei visited China and reiterated expanding friendly relations between the two countries. At that time, Beijing also saw Iran as a

good partner for reasons as follows: tackling Soviet's threats together (1980s); shaking off the status of international isolation (especially after the 1989 Tiananmen Square affair); benefiting from bilateral trade; importing oil for the rapid growth of China's economy (emerging in 1993). From the mid-1990s, the two countries have developed more and more closer ties. To this day, China is still thinking everything of Iran and regarding Islamic Republic as an important Middle Eastern partner.

## **II. Why China Regards Iran As A Partner Today?**

Beijing can get help or benefits from Tehran in several aspects as follows.

### **1) Oil and Gas**

The year of 1993 has a special implication in the China history of energy development. It was in that year when China became a net oil importer for the first time. From then on, China's need for additional sources of energy has been increasing. Just as Charles E. Ziegler said, "From 1992 to 2005 the People's Republic of China went from self-sufficiency in petroleum to dependence on imports for over one-third of total consumption. China is the world's second largest energy consumer after US, and in 2004 it surpassed Japan as the world's number two oil importer" (Ziegler, 2006). After Saudi Arabia and Angola, in 2009 Iran was the third-largest crude supplier to China with shipments reaching 23.15 million tones, accounting for 11.4% of China's total crude imports. According to the US Energy Department's Energy Information Administration, China is Iran's second most important oil customer. China's rapid growth in oil imports virtually guarantees that the China's commercial and political relations with Iran will deepen (Haddick, 2010: April 16).

In order to access Iranian oil and gas safely, China has invested in Iran on a large scale. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)

won a 1.76-billion-dollar contract for the initial development of the North Azadegan oil field in western Iran in January 2009. CNPC has also signed a nearly five-billion-dollar deal with Iran to develop phase 11 of the South Pars gas field, taking over the project from France's Total (*Facts about China-Iran Ties*). In July 2010, Iranian Deputy Oil Minister Hossein Noqrehkar Shirazi said that Iran's main economic partner China has invested around 40 billion dollars in the Islamic Republic's oil and gas sector (*China Invests \$40b in Iran Oil and Gas Sector*).

## 2) North-western China's Security

Beijing has been puzzled by the Xinjiang Uyghur separatism for a long time. Xinjiang is situated in the border area of northwest China and occupies an area of 1.6649 million sq km, accounting for 1/6 of Chinese territory. About half of the region's population is composed of Turkic-speaking Muslims, including over 1 million Kazakhs and some 9 million Uyghurs. In the 1990s, influenced by religious extremism, separatism and international terrorism, part of the "East Turkistan" forces both inside and outside China were reported to have turned to splittist terrorism and sabotaging activities with violence as their chief means of resisting Beijing's governance (*History and Development of Xinjiang*).

According to a Chinese government report, Uighur separatists were responsible for 200 attacks between 1990 and 2001, causing 162 deaths and injuring more than 440 people. In the largest single incident in 1997, as many as 100 people may have been killed during a pro-independence uprising in the town of Ili (Chung, 2002: July/ August). Since the terrorist event of 9/11, Uyghur separatism has received increasing official attention. *China's National Defense in 2002* identified terrorism as a top ranking security issue, specifically

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<sup>①</sup> See Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2002", <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/20021209/index.htm>.

pointing to the Western Xinjiang region, where separatists want to create an independent "East Turkistan". North-western China's security is indeed a serious problem in China. The most recent case is the Urumqi riot that happened on July 5, 2009. The Urumqi event caused several hundred deaths, including both Uyghurs and Hans (the majority ethnic group within China).

Beijing believes that cutting off the outside contacts is necessary to contain the Uyghur separatists. Therefore, China must establish good relations with peripheral Muslim countries, especially Turkey and Iran. After the 2009 Urumqi riots, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan said it "is a kind of genocide," (*Turkey Attacks China "Genocide"*). The Turkey Trade and Industry Minister called for a boycott on Chinese goods (*Turkey Calls for Boycott of Chinese Goods*, 2011: March 11). Iran said it shared the concerns of Turkey, and appealed to the Chinese government to respect the rights of the Muslim population in Xinjiang (*Turkey and Iran Concerned over Development in Xinjiang*, 2011: March 11). Though Beijing was very angry for those Turkish statements, China has to cooperate with these countries to deal with the Xinjiang Uyghur separatists.

### 3) Trade and Non-oil Business

As China has to find overseas markets for its huge amounts of products, Iran is an important trade partner in the Middle East. In 2009, China became Iran's premier trade partner with bilateral trade worth 21.2 billion dollars and Chinese companies directly supplied Iran with 13% (7.9 billion dollars) of its imports. With the recovery of the global economy, the growth in Sino-Iranian trade is expected to continue (*Staff Writers, China Takes over from West as Iran's Main Economic Partner*, 2011: March 11). According to its Ministry of Commerce, China exported \$5.44 billion worth of goods to Iran during the first two quarters of 2010. In May 2009, the two countries signed a number of agreements totaling \$17 billion in economic cooperation (*Iran, China Sign Deals Worth \$17 Billion*, 2009: May 18). A senior



Iranian official, head of Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce Asadollah Asgaroladi said in early November 2010 that Iran and China have drawn plans to increase the value of bilateral trade to 50 billion dollars by 2015. At that time, the Iranian Ambassador to Beijing, Dr. Javad Mansouri, said, "The Islamic Republic sets no limitation for investment of Chinese companies in Iran," He expressed confidence that investment in Iran "will cover the entire Middle East region." (*Iran welcomes Chinese Investment*, 2010: December 3. China has proposed a series of railroad projects that would connect the country's heartland with Central Asia, linking China with Iran via Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (Yonah, 2010: March 9).

#### 4) International Support

China's rise has been a very important topic for many years. G. Ikenberry states: "The rise of China will undoubtedly be one of the great dramas of the twenty-first century. China's extraordinary economic growth and active diplomacy are already transforming East Asia, and future decades will see even greater increases in Chinese power and influence" (2008: January/February). But during this period, Chinese have encountered increasing challenges from the outside world. Many Westerners and countries are afraid of a rising China. Just as essays in Gary Schmitt's book *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition* (2009) put it, "there is a wide consensus among American strategic thinkers that America's greatest challenge over the next decades will be the rise of China. With its expanding economy and formidable military growth, China is positioning itself to challenge the United States as the greatest international power on the world stage. "In fact, almost all of the Chinese have been eager to see the revitalization of China. For most Chinese, China's rise is not equal to expansion or aggression, but a wealthier and freer life. Unfortunately, China has often been misunderstood by parts of the world and treated with unfriendly reactions abroad. For example, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo indeed did hurt the feelings of a

substantial number of Chinese people. This decision by the Norwegian Peace Prize committee caused many Chinese to discredit the goodwill shown to China by some foreign governments. The Chinese government was also angry for the perceived affront. In such a case, China sought as much international support as possible for its position on the matter. Developing countries, including the Islamic Republic, were Beijing's main targets for support on its position and good international relations.

### **III. What Are Chinese Arguments on Iran?**

Though both the Islamic Republic of Iran and China are eager to maintain their friendly bilateral relations and develop it deeply and widely, unfortunately the Iranian nuclear crisis does have a negative effect on Sino-Iranian intercourses. It is a fact that Iran has been a friend of China for a long time, but for China's overall international diplomacy the Islamic Republic plays only a little role after all. How has Beijing contacted with Iran in the shadow of nuclear crisis? Several arguments about Iranian nuclear crisis have already come into being in the Chinese strategic diplomacy and international relations.

#### **1) To Continue a Pro-Iran Policy**

As mentioned earlier, China has a history of friendship with Persia, both in the imperial period and in the contemporary times. There has been no serious conflict between them and China can also benefit from their friendly bilateral relations. Why not continue the pro-Iran policy? In my view, there are two groups supporting this view. One consists of the traditional forces including some scholars, diplomats and civilians. These people are largely influenced by Mao Zedong's "Three Worlds Theory," which posited that international relations comprise three politico-economic worlds: the First World: the superpowers; the Second World, the superpowers' allies; and the Third World, the nations of the Non-Aligned Movement. According to

Mao's view, China was a member of the Third World and of course was not a follower of the superpowers. The Three Worlds theory was different from the Western theory of the Three Worlds which said that the First World was the United States and its allies, the Second World was the Soviet Union and its allies, and the Third World was the neutral and nonaligned countries. These supporters of Mao's views argue that China's Iran policy should be decided on the bilateral mutual interests and not be decided or heavily influenced by other countries, especially the superpowers. The other group includes the sections of energy, commerce and Xinjiang issue. It is very easy to understand their policy option.

2) To Support the US Policy?

Facing the Iranian nuclear crisis, there is another opposite argument in China that it must stand together with Iranian nuclear opponents. Scholars influenced by the modern international relations theories, diplomats in contact with Western countries and some young Chinese are the main supporters of this argument. The scholars and diplomats usually think China's diplomacy is a macrocosm. According to Chinese President Hu Jintao's Report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 15, 2007, China's foreign policy concerns would focus on developed countries, neighboring countries, other developing countries and multilateral affairs (*Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress*, 2011: March 11). Hu's enunciation of China diplomacy has been generally understood that the respective importance of the four focus points identified above is gradually reduced. That is to say, when China faces a foreign issue simultaneously concerning all four factors, Beijing will first give its focus to developed countries, then neighboring countries, other developing countries, and finally multilateral affairs. This is one reason for the view of supporting the US Iran policy. The other reason for this argument is that more and more Chinese scholars and diplomats have accepted western international theories and they do not agree with the Iranian nuclear development motive. As for some young university students, because

they don't know much about Iranian history and are deeply influenced by Western-dominated international media, sometimes they have a negative understanding of Iran.

3) "To Sit on the Fence or Stand by"

The two opposite arguments mentioned above dominate discussions about China's Iran policy. There are two other opinions concerning Iran in the nuclear crisis, one is sitting on the fence; the other is standing by. Compared to the former two claims, these two opinions do not have too many supporters. Those who support the stand-by role are expected to benefit from both sides of the Iranian nuclear conflict. At least they do not want to clash with the Islamic Republic and US conflict. But more and more Chinese have realized that this tactic can bring China more harm than benefit. Those who support the "looker-on" opinion think that China should focus on itself development, and there is no need to take care of outer affairs. To a great extent, the supporters of standing by are puzzled by pro-Iran and pro-US arguments. With the rising of China's international status and the strengthening of Sino-Iranian discourse, China has gradually not regarded these two opinions as its policy options.

#### **IV. Potential Determinants of the Future China's Iran Policy**

As many know, there is a significant difference between arguments and policies. How does Beijing see its Iran policy? In the new situation, China, a rising power, has to reevaluate its Iran policy. Personally, there are several determinants in the decision-making process of China's Iran policy.

1) China's Self-position

What kind of country China is today, a world or regional power? This issue has been argued for many years both internally and externally. According to a 2006 survey from Germany's Bertelsmann Foundation, the United States will lose its position as the undisputed

leading world power over the next one and a half decade, with China emerging as a formidable rival (*China to Rival US as World Power by 2020*, 2006: June 2). When the world was caught in the 2007-2010 economic crisis, almost all countries' governments said that China has become a world power. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged China to play a greater role in solving the world's economic, environmental and political problems, saying that without the participation of both China and the United States, global problems could not be solved (Spillius, 2009: February 16.). Of Course China knows the intention of US Secretary of State. What she said was similar to the meaning of "Chiamerica." That is to say, China has been asked to help other countries with its own wealth. It's said that this was China's responsibility, because China has already been regarded as a major world power.

Now, many Chinese regard China as a world power. But more Chinese do not agree with this belief. We still think that our country is still only a regional power. In our view, China is still a developing country. Compared to current developed countries, China has a very long gap to develop to be identified clearly as a world power. Even in northeast Asia or the Asia-Pacific, China also faces many challenges. Additionally, the Chinese government has to deal with the issues of Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. If a country cannot yet provide its citizens a wealthy and free life, how can we say this country is a world power?

If Beijing feels that China has become a world power, then China must act as one. China has to actively participate in solving problems in the world. In fact, Beijing has done this.

## 2) The Future US-Iranian Relations

China itself has several interests in Iran; then we can easily conclude that China will give Islamic Republic more concerns. It is a fact that US-Iranian relations have a significant effect on the relations between Beijing and Tehran. To a great extent, the Sino-Iranian relation is also an issue of US-Iranian relations. If Iran normalizes its relations with US what will happen to the Sino-Iranian relations? Let's see the current political developments in the Middle East, we can't

ignore this possibility. The same case exists in North Korea. In my view, if possible, Tehran would rather do business with the US and EU than trade with China. Iran can benefit more from contacts with developed countries. Also China cannot provide Iran with enough advanced technologies which it urgently need. Taking into account that both the US and EU have often regarded China as an aggressive rival; it is not easy for China to believe that Iran is still an ideal partner when close US-Iranian relations would exist.

### 3) Domestic Muslim Affairs (especially in Xinjiang)

The Chinese Muslim population is more than 20 millions, most of whom are living in the northwest China and are therefore more concerned about Middle East affairs. From a historical point of view, China's border areas, China's Muslim region, has lagged behind the economic development of the inland. Presently Beijing is working hard to develop its border areas to promote greater trade across the borders. To a large extent, the key to solve the issue of Xinjiang separatism is its economic development. With the improvement of living standards, the Xinjiang Uyghur separatists can be increasingly isolated. If the Chinese government eliminated the Uighur separatism by means of economic development, China could more easily deal with its foreign relations in the areas bordering the Xingjiang Autonomous Region. That is to say, on this issue some countries will lose some of their current ability to bargain with China in terms of trade, energy, and cross-border relationships.

### 4) Other (Major) Powers' Attitudes toward China

At present, the Iranian nuclear crisis is still a troublesome international issue. To solve this problem needs international cooperation, especially among the great powers. Even if China see itself as a regional power, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it must be present. China has been consistently asked to cooperate with US and EU on the issue of sanctions against Iran for its nuclear proliferation.

But what needs to be mentioned is that Beijing has always considered China's diplomacy holistically. If major powers honestly ask China to stand with them on one issue and intensively oppose China on other issues, usually Beijing will be sceptical about their intentions. Therefore, I believe that other (major) powers' attitudes toward China can affect China's foreign policy in many aspects. If these governments want to change China's current Iran policy, first they must change their attitudes towards China in several ways.

Undoubtedly, on the one hand, China's Iran policy must be decided on its own national interests. Trying to forcefully change its policy is not desirable. On the other hand, we must realize that China's interests in Iran are not fixed or may not even be very safe. So China's Iran policy based on its own geopolitical interests is dynamic too.

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