

# Chinese - Iranian Military Relations

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## Abstract

This article outlines the dimensions of defensive relations between Iran and China, both from political and strategic aspects on the scope of defense diplomacy. Furthermore, the article shows, why the two countries are seeking to upgrade their relationship to a strategic level. In this respect, defense diplomacy is an important tool in international relations, and can illustrate the underlying mechanism that makes defense diplomacy an effective geopolitical tool. Although, there is a paucity of research on Iran-China defense diplomacy in the international security literature, yet this relationship has important implications for East Asia and Middle East regional security. This concept -specifically after 2013- became the central dynamics of the complex relationship between Iran and China where both countries have institutionalized a series of confidence building measures in bilateral defense-military relations. In this sense, the two countries seek to develop mutually beneficial ties to a stable international and regional environment. This paper discusses how China and Iran are preparing to launch a joint military exercise during the Rouhani era and in what ways the Islamic Republic's defense diplomacy has engaged in a continuing military modernization program with China that is expanding the capabilities available to the Iranian arms forces. Nevertheless, the paper suggests that due to China's political considerations and U.S. role in this regard, Sino-Iranian defense ties remain relatively shallow and sketchy.

**Keywords:** Iran, China, Defense Diplomacy, U.S., Military ties, Strategic Alliance

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(Received 1 March 2015 Accepted 12 August 2015)

## Introduction

Subsequent to the fall of the Pahlavi regime and the success of the revolution, Iranian foreign policy underwent a dramatic change and entered into a new phase. In fact, prior to the Islamic revolution, Washington was the main exporter of military equipment to Tehran. In this period, Iran was able to purchase some of the most sophisticated conventional weaponry available at the time. Since 1979, however, and the breakdown of Iran's relations with the West, Iran has had to rely on the import of military equipment from other suppliers, such as China. In early 1980s, Iran-China relations began without any strategic implications. During this period, Iranian decision maker's elites called for the empowerment of the "third world." To achieve this goal, Tehran immediately ceased its membership of the CENTO and became a strong advocate of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This policy has transmuted into a discourse accentuating the need for a multipolar world order that is not dominated by a single superpower. In fact, Iran perceives itself as one of the major players in such an international system together with China.

Iran and China seem natural historical allies. In this context, Sino-Iranian relations are rooted in both countries having historical narratives that characterize the international system as unjust and dominated by Western powers. On the other hand, the relationship between China and Iran has grown stronger especially since the late 1980s, when Tehran facing steadily expanding U.S.-imposed sanctions and arms embargoes reached out to Beijing for assistance in the

development of its military capabilities during the Iran-Iraq War. The two countries have much in common. Both proudly trace their roots to ancient civilizations. Both have emerged from a long history of empire. And both are important players in East and West Asia. China has aided Iran's efforts to modernize its military hardware and doctrine through the transfer of military technology and sales of small arms and tactical ballistic, anti-access systems and anti-ship cruise missiles.

As an integral part of Iranian diplomacy, military links have played an ever increasingly important role in Iran's foreign relations, specifically after 1997 and during Ali Shamkhani former Iran Defense Minister. By contrast, China's defense diplomacy has ushered in a new era of all-round, multi-channel development since the country launched its drive of reform and opening to the outside world more than two decades ago and especially after the convocation of the Fourth Plenum of the 13th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1989.<sup>(1)</sup>

When Hassan Rouhani came to office in 2013, the Iranian government has adjusted some of its tactics and strategies to achieve core objectives such as foreign policy and defense-security programs in order to confidence-building and minimize international suspicions. In continuation of this approach, Sino-Iranian relations have generally improved since the P5+1 countries and Iran signed an interim agreement in November 2013. Accordingly, on May 2014, China and Iran agreed to deepen defense ties, according to following high-level talks between Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Dehghan in a bid to expand the bilateral defense relationship. Therefore, currently Chinese and Iranian interlocutors say that Sino-Iranian discussions are underway, in multiple channels, about expanding bilateral defense and military exchange. It means that, formal defense ties between Iran and China made a series of strides in the Rouhani era. These included high-level leadership visits and unprecedented port calls involving the two

countries' navies.

As this paper makes clear, these developments will ensure that China emerges as a potential peer military power in the region. As a result, the IRI sees these changes as the emergence of a clear strategic cooperation in terms of strategic influence. Some of the Iranian politicians believe that as Chinese influence expands, Western pressure will decrease and Iran will have greater space to pursue its national interest. Would this indeed mean that China is also bound to establish a strategic partnership with Iran sometime in the future?

To answer this question one will have to analyze several factors that have been playing pivotal roles in shaping the Sino-Iran entente. Meanwhile the objective of this paper is to categorize the content of Sino-Iranian defense diplomacy to clarify the general picture and characteristics, and particularly the strategic intentions of its military exchanges. However, there are many obstacles in understanding China's military diplomacy. There has been some progress in representing the state of affairs in official documents which can provide an understanding about real intentions behind China's actual behavior. Over the last few years officials from China and Iran have met on several occasions in order to discuss ways in which defense cooperation between the two countries could be strengthened further. Thus, given the election of a new Iranian President, and after historic nuclear deal, "the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" in Vienna on July 14, 2015 between Iran and the P5+1, now is growing optimism in Iran and the West, and an excellent time to review the Sino-Iranian defense relations to assess its likely future direction.

### **I. Background**

Reading a recent "Defense White Paper" of any number of countries or look at the range of foreign relations one country has with others in the contemporary age, and one is likely to come across the term 'defense diplomacy' (Fris, 2013: 3). In international politics, defense diplomacy refers to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives through

the peaceful employment of defense resources and capabilities. “Although the exact definition of defense diplomacy, sometimes labeled military diplomacy, remains uncertain, it is generally considered the nonviolent use of a state's defense apparatus to advance the strategic aims of a government through cooperation with other countries” (Winger, 2014).

Owing to a close link between the security and foreign policies of a country, there are many decussating points between defense and diplomacy. The use of the Armed Forces to support state diplomacy goes back to the very origins of nations. Initially, this support was intended to reinforce national interests by demonstrating one country's military capability to impose its interests or will on another, or as an element to deter foreign ambitions, whether political, territorial or economic.<sup>(2)</sup> Now, the question about alliance and integration in foreign policy is considered as one of the most important questions in international studies. From this point of view, many of the studies in international relations are based on the effort to realize how some of the states unite with each other. Despite some different studies in various paradigms in International Relations (IR), it seems that most of the IR theories build a consensus on the matter that alliance is the reaction to foreign threats.

Since 1979, Iran has always tried to protect its survival interests and national security against its regional and international enemies. It has attempted to overcome the challenges in its security environment either through internal and external balancing.<sup>(3)</sup> Within this context, conventional deterrence has been a major column of Iranian military strategy by defense diplomacy. The experience of war with Iraq in 1980, and the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) drove home for Iranian policymakers that their country, in its current political configuration, had no strategic depth: virtually any of Iran's neighbors and several other regional states could be used by America and its allies as platforms for attacking the Islamic Republic or otherwise undermining its security and independence. To hedge

against this, Tehran is willing to expand military relations with Beijing.<sup>(4)</sup>

And the other hand, one of the notable trends in the international security environment is the “rise of the rest” (Zakaria, 2008). For this reasons, many scholars of international relations view China as a rising power, and perhaps one day capable of replacing the United States as the Asia's dominant state (Mearsheimer:2014, Krasner:2014 and Kissane:2005). In the face of a rising China, the most fundamental issues of Persian Gulf governments (including Iran) are how a stronger China affects their own security. In this regard, at the dawn of the ‘Pacific Century’, as China grows stronger and seeks to play a greater role in regional and world affairs,<sup>(5)</sup> it will be important for the Iranian decision-makers to understand the defense and military capabilities and intentions of the Chinese leadership in all spheres, not only trade-related matters. Gradual increase in economic and political power of People's Republic of China (PRC) has caused some Iranian defense and security officials to think that they can illustrate and experience strategic relations with PRC<sup>(6)</sup>.

But some China analysts in Tehran believe that, “Iran and China are not facing common threats at international level to be used as a ground to develop strategic collaboration and promote bilateral ties to the level of strategic alliance. There is great difference between security issues as well as threats faced by Iran and China. In other words, each country pursues totally different priorities in its international interactions” (Shariatinia, 2014: 3). Also some others believe that China's opposition to a new pressure against Iran, could only delay the West pressure against IRI not halt them. In other words, using the China card is not a permanent solution for Iran.<sup>(7)</sup> In theory, this makes great sense. Nevertheless, in the coming years, Tehran could deepen its long-standing relationship with the PRC in the defense affairs, cyber sectors, and strategic domains.<sup>(8)</sup> It means that, if sanctions on Iran are lifted after nuclear deal

(JCPOA/BARJAM), China has the capacity to facilitate Iran's rise as a regional power. Therefore, if JCPOA brings arms embargo relief to Tehran after five years (probably in 2020), China will no doubt intensify its presence in Iran's defense-military sectors. Tehran is sure to widen its partnership with Beijing and will be launched the defense trade and technology after the deal. Nevertheless, a successful resolution of the nuclear issue does not mean that Iran-China defense diplomacy will improve immediately.

## II. Mutual Interest

Historically, Iran and China have a long record of relations. "China and Iran's durable ties stretch back as far as the Han and Parthian empires, when the two civilizations were trade partners on the ancient Silk Road" (Lim, 2015: 3). On this basis, the two countries today see themselves as rising powers, with converging interests in multiple arenas. In other words, through more than four decades of diplomatic relations, Iran and China have increased their cooperation in many spheres, particularly in trade and defense sectors. On economic level, the two countries play an increasingly important role in each other's markets. Trade between them was worth more than \$52 billion in 2014, up from \$40 billion the previous year.<sup>(9)</sup>

But, the relationship between Beijing and Tehran evokes special interest internationally, primarily because the two regional powers are thought to pose a challenge to U.S. hegemony in their neighborhood. Their geographical linkages with significant regions of Asia are a source of much of their geopolitical potential. China is the largest entity in the region and its vast territory joins it with East Asia, Central Asia and South Asia. Likewise, Iran is the largest geopolitical entity in the Persian Gulf, and shares its borders with 15 countries. These highly strategic locations increase the economic, trade and political potential of both states and enable them to exercise considerable influence on neighboring regions in particular and the world in general. Iran and China also have a number of shared

geopolitical interests in the greater Central Asia, including combating Sunni extremism in Afghanistan, and maintaining a stable regime in the Persian Gulf that excludes Western actors.

Iran has always viewed China as a good friend in the world. China is the most important “strategic partner” (not necessarily strategic ally) of Iran, being able to not only strengthen Iranian economy and the defense capability, but Iranian interests in the international arena too. The essence of Iran’s foreign policy is formation of a multipolar world under the aegis of the UN, where in future Iran and other Islamic states could represent one of the powerful poles. However, at present due to instability near Iran borders it seems an unachievable task. Overall, China for Iran not only a great power to supply Tehran with arms, but also an independent, non-aligned and developing Asian country in the new world order. Chinese experience of development, successfully combining the West and East achievements under preservation of local traditional values, represent the most attractive model to copy (Yuldasheva, 2014). Especially in the case of military technologies and its reverse engineering.

Tehran and Beijing have ties that predate the latter's need for oil imports. Iran is also the only country on the Persian Gulf littoral not allied with Washington, a crucial fact for People's Liberation Army strategists who consider the U.S. China's likeliest adversary (Singh, 2014: 7). In this regard, the two countries are close interest to defense cooperation by virtue of their geographical and economical proximity that makes their regional policies mutually interdependent. This may contribute largely to the construction of the new international order in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia regions after eventual regulation of the Iranian nuclear program issue. On the other hand, Beijing and Tehran have a series of coincident interests and approaches on the regional problems, including Middle Eastern crisis. In the interests of security both sides are interested in the speedy stabilization and peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan with widely represented



inclusive government. At the same time both countries are anxious by long-term presence of the U.S. military forces at their borders and the growing influence of the U.S. in the region (Yuldasheva, 2014: 15). Due to the ongoing U.S.-Iranian discrepancies Iran is obviously interested in providing itself by a strategic union with such a rising global power as Chinese People's Republic.

For China, closer relations with Iran are part of larger trend of finding military partners outside the immediate Asia-Pacific region. Working under the imperative of embracing “new historic missions,” the PLA and the PLAN have been expanding their operations abroad to match China's growing national interests. Expanding the geographical reach of China's military requires willing regional partners (Tiezzi, 2014: 7). Iran is a particularly attractive candidate for this cooperation due to its own military strength, stability, and estrangement from the West (particularly the U.S.). Better ties with Iran give China a window into the Middle East, a region where its interests are rapidly growing as its appetite for energy increases. The U.S. alliance with the Persian Gulf countries has ensured a security regime consistent with U.S. interests in the Middle East. However, the Persian Gulf is not fully and securely within the U.S. orbit as long as the Islamic Republic opposes the U.S. presence in the region (Rezaei, 2015a) Today, China and Iran continue to have strong interests in developing mutual cooperation in many fields, particularly in defense and military affairs.

### III. Constrains

President Rouhani's election and beginning of the talks on Iran's nuclear program virtually legitimizes latently developing Iranian-Chinese relations. But the major obstacles for successful development of Iranian-Chinese partnership in military and defense cooperation is the “U.S. Iranian strategy”, prohibiting huge investments and active participation in big scale military projects with Iran. Other factors are “the China's Peaceful Development Policy”, “Iran's Nuclear

Program” and “UN-U.S. Sanctions”. In this environment, although Iran is under pressure significantly, other countries cooperating with it will be affected as well China's military cooperation with Iran therefore makes it susceptible to Western censure.

Both sides are wary about a hostile international environment dominated by the United States. But China's view of the U.S. is much more nuanced than Iran's, who regards the U.S. as Enemy Number One. Indeed, “China is not an enemy of the United States, like Iran, but a legitimate peer competitor” (Denmark and Molvenon, 2010: 185). But as in previous instances, China's increasing interest in Iran is determined by a number of external factors. In fact, China's policy towards Iran has often been described as ambiguous, in supporting Washington, on the one hand, while protecting Tehran, on the other hand.<sup>(10)</sup> It means that, China is aware that its interests lie in decent relations with Washington. Beijing policy toward Tehran depends on the state of its relationships with Washington. In fact, a closer analysis shows that China is using Iran as a bargaining chip with the United States on, among others, two key security issues, i.e., Taiwan<sup>(11)</sup> and the oil supply<sup>(12)</sup>. The guarantee of a secured oil supply from the Middle East in addition to a comprehensive policy of the U.S. with regard to Chinese security interests in Taiwan as well as the use of smart sanctions against Tehran, which would thus take into account, to a certain extent, Beijing economic interests in Iran, are, indeed, the guarantee of Beijing's support to the U.S. policy towards Iran.

Accordingly, the more strained the relations between China and the U.S., the better the relations between China and Iran, and vice versa. More precisely, it seems that Iran is a means which China uses vis-à-vis the U.S. in order to promote its own more global interests. In this regard, in International Relations, Chinese and American interactions can be explained by a neoliberal contextual structure of conflicting cooperation. “China's near-term goal is to do more business with Iran without facing the threat of being penalized for violating U.S. trade sanctions” (Sun, 2014). Nevertheless, Beijing's

attempts to placate Washington (and preserve the ability of Chinese companies to operate in the U.S. market) periodically raise Tehran's ire. For example, Tehran ended CNPC's contract for the Azadegan oil field in April 2014, citing CNPC's non-compliance with the terms of the deal (Rezaei, 2015b) China also benefits from strained Iranian-U.S. ties because they enhance Beijing's diplomatic and economic leverage with both sides. Indeed, U.S. and Chinese strategic interests in Iran have often been seen as a zero-sum game. It is not uncommon to hear Chinese experts expressing the view that they would like to see the United States continue to be bogged down in the Middle East<sup>(13)</sup> and hence unable to shift more attention to dealing with China and the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, if U.S. policy makers place a high priority on an Iran-related issue, Beijing will try to pursue policies that appear to meet U.S. concerns, though often without much public fanfare to avoid appearing to cave in to U.S. threats. If U.S. policy makers were to confront Beijing with a stark choice of being “with us or against us” on the Iranian nuclear program, Beijing would more likely side with Washington against Tehran (Weitz, 2013). But after 2013 and in the Rouhani era, thus far China has not faced such a stark choice.

China wants to be regarded as a major ‘must’ agent in the present international world order, and able to be trusted with international responsibilities.<sup>(14)</sup> Scholars have long debated whether China is a status quo or revisionist state. From a Chinese perspective though, a key question for a rising nation is how to handle its relationship with existing global institutions and systems.<sup>(15)</sup> All this explains the reasons that led China to regularly support the initiatives aimed at preventing Iran from developing a nuclear program: first through negotiations, and then by supporting the UN sanctions against Iran. In this respect, some of the Iranian political observers have maintained that, expecting more commitment from China in its relations with Iran would be unrealistic. Indeed, to some extent, China follows ‘the principles of no confrontation and no alliance’.<sup>(16)</sup>

Since the beginning of the Iranian nuclear crisis in 2003, the United States, as a superpower, has always wanted to adopt a united front—gathering, under its leadership, the five most powerful nations—in the face of what, according to the American administration, is Tehran's government threat on international collective nuclear non-proliferation security. Therefore, by giving Beijing guarantees on several issues between 2005 and 2010, the U.S. has succeeded in gaining China's cooperation on the Iranian nuclear crisis. Beijing voted for four UN sanctions resolutions, although it balked at subsequent more punitive measures sought by the West. 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 has a negative effect on Sino-Iranian military interactions. Beijing has consistently defended the Islamic Republic's right to peaceful use of nuclear technology; it regularly notes that a diplomatic solution will require the West to acknowledge Iran's right, as a sovereign state and Nuclear Non- Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory, to enrich uranium under safeguards. Yet, for China's overall international diplomacy the Islamic Republic plays only a little role after all. At the same time, China's implicit message to the West is that if it wants a successful resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue, it will need China's cooperation. Therefore, China uses its ties with Iran as an implicit bargaining chip to advance other Chinese national security interests.

Since 1979, numerous governments and multinational entities have imposed arms embargo and even military technology sanctions<sup>(17)</sup> on Iran. For example in March 2007, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1747 which, inter alia, established an embargo on the export from Iran of all arms and related materials, thereby banning all states and groups from purchasing or receiving arms from Iran. The resolution also called on all states to 'exercise vigilance and restraint' in their supply of any items covered by the UN Register of Conventional Arms to Iran. On

9 June 2010 Security Council Resolution 1929, not unanimously adopted, imposed further restrictions on arms exports to Iran. UNSCR 1929 inter alia prohibits states from directly or indirectly supply or help to supply, Iran with major conventional weapons as defined by the UN Register of Conventional Weapons - battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, large caliber artillery, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, certain missiles and missile launchers. The resolution also prohibits the supply of related spare parts along with 'technical training, advice, services or assistance related to the provision, manufacture, maintenance or use of' the listed items.<sup>(18)</sup>

Unlike most UNSC arms embargoes, certain weapons including larger land based Surface to Air Missile (SAM) systems and most Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and other equipment delivered specifically for military use are not covered by the arms embargo in resolution 1929.<sup>(19)</sup> However states are called upon to exercise restraint in the supply of arms and related materiel not covered by the embargo to Iran. Although Beijing regards comprehensive sanctions counterproductive in international politics, yet the Russians and Chinese, along with ten other members of the UN Security Council, voted to subject Iran, for the first time, to an embargo on creating and maintaining the most import sinews of military strength. In essence, one of the most significant aspects of the latest round of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran has received the least attention - the ban on major weapons deliveries.

On the other hand, the U.S. also sharply reacted at Iranian-Chinese agreements in the military sphere<sup>(20)</sup>. Under the U.S. pressure bilateral cooperation in this sphere was stopped in 1999. However, some Chinese companies were not once been imposed sanctions (Bilefsky and Sanger, 2005). In particular, in the early 2012, Washington imposed sanctions against three Chinese firms, blamed in supply of substances and materials, which could be used in production of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>(21)</sup> It is all the more significant then, that in the latest round of negotiations on UN

Security Council sanctions (1929), China and Russia agreed to a total cutoff of these weapons for Iran - including spare parts and technical training. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that to a considerable extent, Tehran remains dependent on Beijing for manufacturing and maintaining the most sophisticated core of Iran's arsenal for military capabilities. But to a considerable extent, China played a crucial role in starting up Iran's indigenous military-industrial sector, greatly helping Iran's military modernization efforts.

#### IV. Scope

To understand the future of Sino-Iranian defense diplomacy, we need to look at the history and review the ups and downs of Tehran-Beijing bilateral military relations.

China has historically been an important arms supplier for Iran. During “imposed war” in the 1980s, China was one of the countries which provided Iran with material support. In fact, Chinese support during Iran's “Holy Defense” motivated Tehran to invest more in defense relations with Beijing. In this regard, China provided Iran with HY-2 Silkworm anti-ship missiles, which allowed it to strike Iraqi and supporting non-combatant shipping in the Persian Gulf, beginning the so-called “Tankers War”. In this period, and with China's modern economic resurgence, the PRC has deepened its relations with Iran through continued arms sales and diplomatic engagement and expanded its presence in the Middle East region at large. But this ostensibly friendly relationship masks a level of mistrust that runs particularly deep on the Iranian side. Tehran has long perceived China as playing a dual game (even in defensive affairs) toward it. For example, although Beijing provided Iran with desperately needed arms during its war with Iraq (1980-1988), it provided Baghdad with well over double the amount of arms during the same period (Keck, 2013). Or in 2007, China secretly sold Saudi Arabia improved ballistic missiles with U.S. approval as Newsweek magazine reported.<sup>(22)</sup>

Thus, in 1989, a decade after the Iranian Revolution and end of the war, two important incidents took place almost simultaneously after which China and Iran respectively entered a new era. On June 3, 1989 Imam Khomeini died and on the next day, June 4, 1989 the Tiananmen incident took place after which the United States imposed sanctions on China. Iran and China once again drew closer to each other. In the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident, China's close cooperation with Iran was essentially also aimed as an indirect way to tell the U.S. that they did not welcome foreign interference into their domestic affairs. China and Iran then also moved closer on defense cooperation. In 1998, Iran's military requirements, and consequently Sino-Iranian defense cooperation, changed. With Iraq partially disarmed under UN supervision, Iran's defense budgets fell sharply. Iran's leaders opted to forgo major increases in conventional arms, concentrating instead on the development of key, advanced, sophisticated technologies, especially missile capabilities. Tehran now sought to develop a self-sufficient indigenous production capacity for these technologies, and China helped it to achieve its objectives (Garver, 2006: 170). For example, in 1990, China signed a ten-year agreement with Iran on military technology exchanges, and missile cooperation was a key focus of the agreement (Cirincione and Others, 2005: 303).

In the late 1980s, China allegedly sold HQ2 surface-to-air anti-aircraft missile systems (which were copies of Soviet SA-75 systems) to Iran; the HQ2 has an effective range of 12-32 km (7-20 miles).<sup>(23)</sup> The HQ2 was modified and renamed the M7 for export as surface-to-surface missile, and in 1992 Iran began to mass produce a modified version of the HQ2 / M7 called the Tondar 69, with an effective range of 150 km.<sup>(24)</sup> During the 1990s China apparently agreed to help Iran set up production lines for M-11s (range of 280 km) and M-9s (range of 600 km) at the Isfahan factory. Iran and Syria had reportedly contributed to the development of the M-9s and even made a deposit on a purchase when they became available. China reportedly reneged

on any commitment to sell complete M-9 systems to the Middle East, but moved ahead with assisting Iran with indigenous development and production capability for missiles closely comparable to the M-9. Nevertheless, China apparently did not transfer whole M-11 missiles to Iran due to U.S. pressure (Garver, 2006: 187).

During his July 1991 visit to Iran, Premier Li Peng traveled to Isfahan and reportedly visited several other complexes where Chinese experts were working to produce various types of missiles (Calabrese, 2006). In the mid-1990s, China provided Iran with a new generation of substantially more capable anti-ship missiles, the C-801 and C-802 (Lippman, 1997). The C-801 is a solid-fuel system with a range of 40 km that can be fired from submarines via torpedo tubes and from aircraft. The C-802 at the time was China's top-of-the-line anti-ship cruise missile, with a longer range of 120 km. China reportedly agreed to sell 150 C-802s to Tehran but only 75 were delivered before the deal was frozen under U.S. pressure (Gill, 1998: 58). In fact, when in 1996 Iran again tested the Chinese C-802 anti-ship missile, the Clinton administration had to exert enormous pressure to force China to commit to not providing or selling any more C-802s to Tehran (Russell, 2005: 128). Reports of the C-802 sale triggered strong political reaction in Washington, and the Clinton Administration considered imposing sanctions on China for the sale, alleging that it violated the 1992 Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act (Gertz, 1997: 58). This act targeted countries transferring destabilizing weapons, in quantitative and qualitative terms, to either Iran or Iraq. Later on, during the first decade of 2000 China remained a major exporter of conventional weapons to Iran, exporting anti-ship missiles such as the TLIO/FL8, very useful in challenging the strong U.S. navy deployment in the Persian Gulf, as well as other submarine-launched missiles. In sum, "Tehran purchased an estimated \$400 million worth of weapons from the PRC between 1993 and 1996, and \$600 million during the 1997-2000 period, according to the U.S Congressional Research Service in 2001, ranking China third as Iran's military



supplier” (Grimmett, 2001).

Since 2002, Iran has continued to upgrade its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, introducing new anti-ship missiles and anti-aircraft capabilities even as concerns over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program have grown in Washington. Based on western resources, in 2010, reports emerged that Iran may have brokered a deal to receive Chinese HQ9 anti-aircraft missiles, derived from the Russian S-300 weapons system and similar in many ways to the U.S. Patriot missile system, with an effective range of approximately 30 km (Strategy Page, February 12, 2010). And also in March 2013, confirming speculations that China continues to supply weapons to Iran, an Iranian vessel off the coast of Yemen was found to be carrying Chinese-made QW-1M man-portable air defense (MANPAD) systems thought to be derived from U.S. Stinger anti-aircraft missiles (Worth and Chivers, 2013).

In addition to receiving anti-ship missile systems directly from China, Iran has used numerous Chinese missile designs as the basis of its own domestically-produced anti-ship missile systems, some of which are being manufactured in Iran with Chinese assistance: The “Noor” long-range anti-ship missile is believed to be a variant of the C801 and C802. The “Kowsar” anti-ship missile, first manufactured in 2004, is based on the Chinese C701 and TL-10 missile systems. The “Raad or Thunder” long-range anti-ship missile, introduced in 2004, appears to be a variant of the HY-2 Silkworm, with an effective range of approximately 360 km<sup>(25)</sup>. The “Nasr” anti-ship missile is based on China's C704 system, and began mass production in 2010. It is radar and television-signal guided, with an effective range of 170 km, and is being produced in cooperation with China Aerospace Group.<sup>(26)</sup> The “Qader” anti-ship missile, unveiled in 2011, is closely related to the Chinese C802 and C803 missile systems (Eshel, 2011). The “Zafar” missile system began its production in early 2012, and is a lightweight, radar-guided anti-ship missile believed to be based on China's C704 and C705 missile systems (Emirzadeh, 2012).

Though Iran domestically develops and produces a variety of missile systems, much of Iran's current missiles capability has its roots in Chinese technology. It is the military aspect of the Iran-China relationship that troubles many observers in the West. China, and to a lesser extent, North Korea, have played a critical role in the development of Iran's A2/AD capabilities, supplying the Islamic Republic with a variety of weapons systems useful from an A2/AD standpoint. Iran's focus on its A2/AD resources signals that it is increasingly prepared to wage an asymmetric fight against a more conventionally capable foe such as the U.S., leveraging agility, speed, and decentralized command and control tactics, combined with advanced anti-ship and anti-aircraft weaponry, to defend its assets on the mainland. China's ongoing support of Iran's A2/AD military program suggests that Beijing views Iran as a proxy military power in the Middle East, and may hope to use Iran to apply pressure on U.S. forces and to restrict Western oil supplies in the event of a Sino-American conflict in the Pacific.

As we saw in the above, China's important role in the development of Iran's military capabilities is clear. Chinese weapons transfers and technology-sharing initiatives — designed to boost arms trade revenues and to enhance Chinese influence in strategic regions — have facilitated the Islamic Republic's emergence as a major Middle Eastern military power, especially in the A2/AD realm. Recent advances in Iranian anti-ship, anti-aircraft, and area-denial capabilities have forced Washington to re-think its approach towards Tehran, especially in the context of Tehran's increasingly transparent bid to develop missile systems, and to view Iran as one possible dimension of China's power projection into the Persian Gulf. But these military ties don't necessarily mean that Iranians trust Chinese military products.

## V. New Directions

A number of recent events in the Rouhani era indicate that, Iran and

China are expanding defense relations amid a growing congruence of interests between the two countries including expanded cooperation against terrorism, exchanges of military personnel for training purposes, and come to a new defense agreement enabling each country's navy to use the other's ports more frequently. Presumably further details are set to be agreed during a later visit by Xi Jinping to Tehran. As mentioned earlier, in the last decade, defense relations between China and Iran have fluctuated between ups and downs and to some extent, "China supplanted Russia as the major weapon provider to Iran"<sup>(27)</sup> (Djallil, 2011: 235). But, stronger China-Iran defense relations after 2013 have begun to reverse a trend of declining cooperation. Bilateral military contacts in two areas warrant attention:

After 2013, High-level military visits between China and Iran have frequently been exchanged. So, the first area concerns high-level military exchanges. For reference, there were only a few publicly reported exchanges between PRC and Iranian military officers between 1996 and 2013 (Garver, 2006: 172). Indeed, according to data contained in China's biannual defense white papers, the most recent such event took place in October 2003, when the commander of the Mobilization Force of the Revolutionary Guards visited Beijing.<sup>(28)</sup> Meanwhile, in 2014 alone saw two such visits. First, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan visited China in May 2014, meeting with Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong, State Councilor Yang Jiechi, and Defense Minister General Chang Wanquan. During his meeting with Chang, Dehghan stated that the purpose of his visit was to strengthen cooperation in the military and defense fields between the two countries. Likewise, Chang observed that friendly relations between the two militaries would further develop with joint efforts from both sides (Xinhua, May 5, 2014).

Second, Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari visited China in October 2014. According to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) official newspaper, this was the first-ever

visit by an Iranian Navy chief to the PRC (PLA\_Daily, October 23, 2014). During his visit, Sayyari met with PLA Navy (PLAN) Commander Admiral Wu Shengli, General Chang and paid visits to the North Sea Fleet, East Sea Fleet and PLAN Submarine Academy. Wu told Sayyari that China hoped to strengthen high-level visits and port calls, as well as technological cooperation and collaboration in personnel training. Sayyari remarked during his visit that Iran aimed to achieve greater cooperation with China in the areas of anti-piracy and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations, as well as in the area of protecting sea lines of communication (PLA Daily, October 23, 2014).

Iran's first and foremost strategic and economic area of interest is the naval commercial route of the Persian Gulf. Since 2008, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) task groups have been deploying on training, defense diplomacy and anti-piracy missions in Middle Eastern waters, and in the lawless seaways off Somalia. Now Tehran has extended its naval horizons, with a new emphasis on Asian waters (Hollingsbee, 2014: 9-10).

On the other hand, China is a rising naval power and hopes one day to muscle out the U.S. Navy presence in Asia, and Iran seeks to use its much more modest navy to remind Washington its influence does not extend into international waters. Therefore, a second feature of renewed military cooperation between China and Iran has been in the area of naval diplomacy and, in particular, mutual port visits between the two navies. In fact, the two such visits that took place in 2013 and 2014 represented the first time that naval vessels from each state visited the other. First, in March 2013, the Iranian destroyer Sabalan and the helicopter carrier Khark paid a visit to Zhangjiagang port, Jiangsu Province. Iranian press stated that the purpose of the visit was to convey Iran's "message of peace and friendship" to China and other East Asian countries (Press TV, March 4, 2013).

Concurrently, Iran let it be known that it saw IRIN as being in the vanguard of efforts to maintain international maritime security,

including Asian waters. In a speech in 2013, for instance, IRIN commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari stressed the importance of the north Indian Ocean and southeastern Asia to Iran, because of the commercial vessel traffic through the Straits of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb and Malacca. He also announced that two IRIN ships had deployed to the Chinese port of Zhangjiagang (Press TV, March 4, 2013). The arrival of IRIN warships at the port was significant on more than one front. First, Zhangjiagang is a major naval port, and is the home base of China's South Sea Fleet. Second, it is a key node for China's oil trade.

Second, in September 2014, two PLAN vessels conducted a five-day port visit at Bandar Abbas, a key Iranian port located along the Strait of Hormuz. China and Iran, for the first time in history, conducted joint naval exercises in Iranian waters, providing Beijing a valuable strategic presence in one of the most important Sea Lines of Communications. The PRC ships were the destroyer Changchun and the frigate Changzhou, both of which were returning to China after conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (PLA Daily, September 22, 2014). The visit involved meetings between PLAN officers and the commanders of the Iranian navy's First Coastal Defense Area and its Southern Fleet, as well as social events involving Iranian and Chinese sailors. During the visit, the PLAN rear admiral in command of the two ships remarked that mutual learning would lead to stronger cooperative relations between the two navies.<sup>(29)</sup> Following the visit, naval ships from both sides held joint drills focused on formation and communications.<sup>(30)</sup> For China, the Iranian naval alliance offers a convenient way-station for Beijing's widening outreach in Africa, and another bonding moment in the largely transactional ties between China and Iran. A deepening Chinese-Iranian naval partnership also could be an extra win for Tehran. Iran often boasts about plans to modernize its fleet, but it remains limited to several diesel-electric submarines and a handful of frigate-class vessels, according to the "U.S. Naval Institute".<sup>(31)</sup> It could be just the

start of a budding naval alliance stretching from the Pacific to the Persian Gulf (Murphy, 2014).

While some observers have speculated that China may eventually establish a formal defense relationship with Iran, perhaps with an eye toward leasing naval facilities that could help the People's Liberation Army Navy's secure the sea lanes used by China to obtain energy from the Middle East, this seems unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future (Afrasiabi, 2010). At present, China has no formal overseas military installations and has stated that it will not seek such, though some People's Liberation Army (PLA) analysts and officers have begun debating the need for such facilities if China's military power is to ever match its economic standing (Reuters, December 13, 2011). Lastly, Iran's Navy has increased the range of its deployments in recent years, making port calls as far away as China and India. It has also participated extensively in the United Nations' anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

Here's a brief rundown on the recent uptick in official exchanges and key events in China-Iran defense diplomacy under Rouhani administration.

Date	Type	Description
March 2013	Port Visit	Two Iranian Navy ships visit Zhangjiagang port
May 2014	High-Level Exchange	Iranian Defense Minister visits China
September 2014	Port Visit	Two PLAN ships visit Bandar Abbas port
October 2014	High-Level Exchange	Iranian Navy Commander visits China

On one level, these developments represent normal activities of the sort that occur between many armed services. China holds high-level exchanges with officers from numerous countries each year, and it has routinely carried out overseas port visits since the mid-1980s (Yung and Rustici, 2010: 12-14). Moreover, since the mid-2000s, China has expanded its naval diplomacy in regions far from its borders. This has been part of the "new historic missions" articulated by then-President Hu Jintao in 2004, which require the PLA to be prepared to safeguard China's expanding national interests, such as in

the Middle East (Hartnett, 2009). Likewise, Iran has developed its naval diplomacy in recent years in order to “show the flag” and demonstrate its abilities to conduct out-of-area operations (Eisenstadt and Paz, 2014). However, the timing of these developments raises some interesting questions. As part of its involvement in international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, the PLAN has conducted multiple port visits in the Middle East since 2008 (Erickson and Strange, 2013: 1). Why, then, did its ships not visit Iran until 2014? Similarly, the PLA has had many opportunities since 2003 to hold public, high-level meetings with its Iranian counterparts. Now, the key question is that, why did it not do so until 2014?

A likely explanation is that expansion of Sino-Iranian defense relations since 2013 has followed improvements in the overall bilateral relationship. The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president in August 2013, a burgeoning energy relationship in 2014 and recent advances by ISIS militants may all have prompted Beijing to upgrade its emphasis on closer relations with Tehran (USNI, October 27, 2014). The tone for the bilateral relationship was set in a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Rouhani on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in September 2013, in which Xi stated that mutual trust had deepened and cooperation had strengthened (China Daily, September 12, 2013). During a second meeting between the two heads of state in May 2014, Xi stated that the two countries would cooperate in all fields, citing oil and gas ventures, high-level exchanges and counter-terrorism as examples (Xinhua, May 22, 2014). By contrast, meetings between Hu Jintao and Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, often focused on PRC concerns over Iran's nuclear program. For example, during a June 2012 meeting, Hu Jintao reportedly admonished Ahmadinejad to “weigh the situation” and take a “flexible and pragmatic approach” toward the nuclear negotiations (Associated Press, June 8, 2012). Through this lens, fostering positive defense ties appears to reflect broader diplomatic

priorities under Xi and Rouhani.

The key issue is whether defense cooperation between Beijing and Tehran expands in a way that jeopardizes U.S. interests. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2012 "Defense Strategic Guidance" singled out both China and Iran as posing an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) challenge to U.S. forces (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2012: 4). To date, there has been only anecdotal evidence that the two countries are cooperating in sensitive areas that may exacerbate the A2/AD challenge. For instance, some Western experts believe that, "a PRC firm may have attempted to transfer man-portable air defense technology to Iran in March 2013" (Gentry, 2013).

In sum, China-Iran defense cooperation made a number of advances in 2013 and 2014, though the level of that cooperation continues to pale in comparison to that of the late 1980s and 1990s. There is nothing inherently disconcerting about leadership visits and port calls, but given that the PRC and IRI have been singled out as posing counter-intervention challenges for U.S. forces, any level of military contact between the two countries should be a reason for continued attention. Therefore, it is important to scrutinize their military relationship, and to gain insight into the strategic and political dynamics leading to closer cooperation between the two countries. Thus, it is difficult to imagine a formal, legal, and publicly acknowledged Chinese Iranian defense alliance, given the negative implications such an arrangement would likely entail for China's relations with the United States, the Arab world, and Israel.

## **VI. Strategic Considerations and Uncertainties**

Under Rouhani and the start of nuclear talks with P5+1 China-Iran relations have been legitimized internationally. To that end, Beijing has found it less costly politically to develop closer ties with the new Iran, which is now cooperating with the West in the nuclear arena. Beijing can be encouraged that deeper -defense- ties to Tehran will



not prompt a strong Western backlash (Rezaei, 2015a). In this respect, China's closest relationship may prove to be with Iran, which offers energy sources that can be accessed by both sea and land and which purchases arms from China. Tehran and Beijing have ties that predate the latter's need for oil imports. Sino-Iranian cooperation has been tempered somewhat by international sanctions on Tehran but is likely to balance in the wake of a nuclear agreement.

Now, given the potential opportunities of evolving China-Iran defense relations, it would be advisable to further explore the strategic and political dynamics that may be giving rise to those developments. Here are some effective implications of the Sino-Iranian defense diplomacy that I believe may not get much attention, but deserve more:

First, in a superficial review, comparisons of imports of major conventional weapons by the Persian Gulf countries, Turkey and even Azerbaijan show that Iran imported considerably, much less than the respective countries in the last decade (Rezaei, 2015c). Therefore, we know that, Iran such as the other countries cannot act in a vacuum. As full analysis shows, outside powers have a major advantage in overall air warfare capability, combat aircraft, and surface-to-air missiles. Iran's target base is at least as vulnerable as that of its Persian Gulf neighbors. The Persian Gulf states already have missile defenses for many key targets, the U.S. is deploying missile defense ships with wide area missile defense capability, and nations like the UAE and Qatar have already indicated that they may buy land-based wide area missile defenses like THAAD (Cordesman and Others, 2014: xv). Given these realities, if countries that friendly relations with Iran such as China alter their policies to sell Iran virtually any advanced weapons technology, the Persian Gulf states, Israel, and the U.S. will have an overwhelming advantage in many areas of air and missile strike capability and missile and air defense. So, the Iranian, on its side, sees China as an ally among the major powers, and a country that is able to counterbalance American power

and its allies as well as to come to Iran's defense. However, there is no certainty in this regard.

On China's side, the Middle East is a region with significant geostrategic importance for the entire global political balance. China will play an increasing role on the global scene, and therefore it needs to reinforce its presence in the regions that are fundamental for the overall fate of the global political balance. On this chessboard, China could have an important role in terms of economic, strategic and ideological influence. Beijing, therefore, is trying to strengthen its military ties with Tehran that represent an opportunity for entering into the regional political balance. Iran is the main target of such a strategy (Jun and Ley, 2010: 52).

Both republics are also Washington's main geo-strategic targets. Therefore, Iran is the only country on the Persian Gulf littoral not allied with Washington, a crucial fact for People's Liberation Army strategists who consider the U.S. as China's adversary. It is especially important to consider how officials and strategic thinkers from both sides perceive the dangers posed by the U.S. presence in their respective regions, and the extent to which bilateral military cooperation is seen as a viable way to mitigate those risks. Evidence that any of those views are shifting in light of the U.S. rebalance to Asia or U.S. military operations in the Middle East could have particularly salient implications for progress in their military relationship. Nevertheless, for the United States, recent developments in China-Iran military relations may not pose an immediate challenge. Currently, those relations appear relatively superficial, even if they do seem to be growing. Further cooperation in non-traditional security areas, such as anti-piracy and counter-terrorism, bring positive benefits to regional security. So, in their current incarnations, China and Iran exemplify states with "counter-hegemonic" foreign policies. Thus, both the PRC and the IRI appreciate U.S. military prowess; neither wants to initiate a war with America. But, because of their revolutionary identities, neither is willing to subordinate its strategic

orientation to U.S. requirements.

China-Iran military relations may be following the broader achievements in the overall bilateral relationship. If this is the case, it would be useful to understand the general direction in which those relations seem to be moving, as well as the perspectives in Beijing and Tehran regarding the opportunities and constraints on cooperation with the other. Evidence of optimism on either side that there may be room to significantly upgrade relations, especially with the advent of new leadership on both sides, could signify more opportunities for enhanced military relations between the two countries. China is a good partner because the U.S. will lose its position as the world's undisputed leading power over the next decade and a half, with China emerging as a formidable rival. Iran needs civil and military technology, and Beijing also could be a good partner in these fields.

And on the other hand, it is important to understand how military interactions between China and Iran facilitate the two country's strategic goals in the Middle East. China's broader approach to the Middle East could shape the nature or extent of its military contacts with Iran, while Iran's goals in its own neighborhood may impact the nature of its interactions with the PLA. The two countries' perspectives on the challenge posed by ISIS, as well as regional piracy and trafficking issues, would be helpful in ascertaining the possible direction of cooperation. As for the U.S.-led West, China has always been exploiting opportunities in countries where the presence of major powers is weak. As part of this strategy, Tehran is an ideal partner for Beijing, both for its natural resources and for its geopolitical influence. Iran is emerging as a new regional power and it is playing a lead role in the Middle East's strategic balance.

China's interests in a stable Iran extend far beyond securing oil supplies and ensuring sanctions relief. Beijing after new defense ties with Iran is actively pursuing the so-called "One Belt, One Road" initiative—including both the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt<sup>(32)</sup>—which is intended to become a

driving force for China's continued economic growth into the next decade and even further into the future. This plan is partially connected to the Grand Western Development Program under former Chinese president Jiang Zemin that sought to sustain China's economic growth by opening up and investing in the western part of the country. As envisioned by President Xi Jinping, One Belt, One Road will create a promising economic corridor stretching across the Eurasian continent (Zhao, 2015). But its ultimate success will hinge on the stability of the Middle East in general and that of Iran in particular. In other words, a genial relationship between Iran and China not only connects three regions; East Asia, West Asia and Central Asia, but also has the potential to positively affect the prevalent regional as well as global politics.

Therefore, any military agreement and defense diplomacy between the two sides will come with remarkable strategic and geopolitical considerations, which will cover a wide region from the Persian Gulf all the way east to the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca in addition to the entire length of the Silk Road and Central Asia (Rezaei, 2015a). All in all, in spite of mutual intentions to improve the level of defense relations, China and Iran have to overcome serious challenges to the practical implementation of their plans. On the one hand, the Chinese concerns about the "U.S. pivot to the East", makes Beijing extremely interested in developing its defense relations with Tehran. On the other hand, Iran is gradually becoming disillusioned regarding the possibility of a quick settlement of the nuclear issue and the complete lifting of economic punitive measures adopted by the U.S., EU, and its partners. This, in turn, compels the authorities of the IRI to be more active in their contacts with the countries that are ready to defense cooperate with Tehran even under existing sanctions. Therefore, China views Iran as a central element in its much-touted Silk Road Economic Belt, which aims to extend Beijing's influence overland through Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and Europe.<sup>(33)</sup>

Under the Iranian president Rouhani, we are currently witnessing a steady increase in defense diplomacy between Iran and China, which has included high-ranking and high profile visits of leading Iranian politicians, diplomats and military advisors to Beijing and its army over the past several months, has affected the PRC to improve relations with IRI and the possibilities of opening a new level for defense and military cooperation. China enjoys increasingly close ties with anti-U.S. government in the world such as Iran in the Middle East. Yet Beijing's path to expand influence in the Middle East is far from clear. In addition, China wants a strategic alliance (of course in a manner special to China) with Iran as a means of screening them from the geo-political encroachment of the United States. Similarly, Iran is counting on Chinese assistance in the redistribution of the balance of power, and also wants more military and security Cooperation with China. However, we need to analyze the nature of these relations in order to decide whether the close Sino-Iranian relations can be described as a strategic alliance.

In this regard, the Chinese and Iranian governments define their relations as 'very close' and 'strategic' in many areas. Though China is quite a difficult and capricious ally for Iran, both states sometimes describe each other as strategic allies. The attribution of strategic alliance is an argument employed very often, in particular by Iran.<sup>(34)</sup> But the reality though is more complex. In other words, when we take a close look, the approaches of the two countries to the concept of strategic alliance are quite dissimilar. Now, a question comes to mind here on the limits of proximity between China and Iran. Tehran views its relations with China through an international political prism and then reduces it to the level of bilateral relations. Beijing, on the other hand, signifies bilateral relations, but still does not consider Iran a serious partner in the world stage. Beijing's current pragmatic approach will continue as long as its relations with Tehran do not conflict with its other interests and its process of international integration. Indeed, the international prospects for Beijing's support

of Tehran are limited. China's approach to Iran's nuclear case is a good example in this regard.

In reality, a strategic alliance is a kind of wide security ties that may involve, among other things, cooperation for the attainment of common goals on matters of military assistance, defense industries, joint military maneuvers, intelligence sharing, deployment of military divisions in partner countries, and military training. For the establishment of a strategic alliance between any two states, there must be consensus and cooperation with respect to their worldviews, political regimes, long-term interests and universal values (Aras and Özbay, 2008: 56). Politically, too, there is frustration among some Iranian elites with China's approach to managing its Persian Gulf dilemma, which sometimes shortchanges Sino-Iranian ties to bolster Sino-American relations. Some Iranian analysts and diplomats say that Beijing will “always” privilege relations with Washington over relations with Tehran (Leverett, F. and H. Leverett, 2014: 23).

Policymakers work for their own national interests. Economically, the U.S. is a far more important economic partner for China than Iran. The relationship is not one-way; the U.S. depends on China as well. Strategically, China values its relations with the U.S. too much to risk a meaningful breach, but it is willing to use U.S. competition with Iran as an opportunity to improve its global strategic position. For example, in 2005, Iran was granted observer status in the SCO, an organization dominated by Russia and China. Thereafter, “Tehran applied for full membership in 2008, but was denied two years later under new rules prohibiting membership to countries that are under UN sanctions” (Panfilova, 2010). The refusal to grant Iran full member status in the SCO was seen by many as a bid not to antagonize the U.S., which opposed Iranian membership in the organization. Although, Iran’s participation in the SCO represents a low-cost method for enhancing its international status, nevertheless, the SCO has limited capabilities in terms of regional security and continues to be stymied by a lack of organizational focus. Thus,

Iranian membership in the SCO would do little to fundamentally change the existing relationship between Tehran and Beijing.

With reference to the above mentioned, there is no agreement between China and Iran for common defense and military cooperation in the event of an attack. If the United States and its allies initiated a military intervention in Iran, Chinese assistance would amount to little more than calling for mediation by international organizations, such as the UN. Therefore, in light of the discussion in this article, we may characterize Sino-Iranian relations as a 'strategic partnership' rather than a 'strategic alliance'. Hence, the major motivation behind Sino-Iranian defense diplomacy is the imposition of U.S. unipolarity and the U.S. desire to pursue hegemonic policies. In addition, as long as the imposition of a unipolar system continues, China will preserve its relations with Iran. Due to its position in the Security Council, it can protract the U.S.-led process to impose military sanctions on Iran. In such an international conjuncture, the relations between China and Iran, although not in the form of a strategic alliance, will continue with ups and downs under the tides of strategic calculations and reciprocal suspicions. Although China and Iran have been enjoying friendly relations, which they are likely to continue to enjoy in the coming decades, no strategic alliance is likely to emerge at any time in the mid to long term.

Since the Sino-Iranian bilateral relations will continue to be plagued by strategic uncertainties, defense diplomacy offers a cost-effective way of managing relations with China. Perhaps for this singular reason, Iran should continue to invest in defense diplomacy; engage China in a robust military-to-military engagement plan; and expand the number and size of these diplomatic initiatives. These discussions are enough to remind us that creating an effective, strategic alliance requires hard work.

### **Conclusion**

Defense diplomacy, conducted as part of Iran's overall diplomacy,

will act as a significant catalyst in strengthening its ties with friendly countries. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 redefined Iran's relations with China. Indeed, the Iranian government views China as a potential ally against the United States, and from the Chinese perspective, Iran is a major power in the region, has the second largest territory in the Middle East and Iran's military capabilities exceed those of other countries in the region. As a Middle Eastern power, Iran, in the Chinese calculus could play a key role in helping China to expand its influence in Persian Gulf and beyond. And the other hand Beijing views Tehran as a potential partner for limiting U.S. influence in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Based on these requirements, when Rouhani came to power in 2013 China-Iran cooperation also extended to the defense diplomacy realm. Most importantly, Rouhani understands that the resolving some of the conflicts and disputes with the U.S. is critical to strengthening Iran's military ties with China and ending its international arms embargo. However, there are many analyses about close defense diplomacy between Iran and China. In this regard, as we see, Iranian-Chinese cooperation in defense-military spheres bears pragmatic, rational character and is defined, first of all, by mutually beneficial interests in the sphere of anti hegemonism and regional security. In this sense, it is stable and is not prone to any sharp fluctuations be present at any future schemes of development in defense diplomacy.

Today, China and the Iran are highly interdependent economically, but many analysts misunderstand the implications of this for power politics. Moreover, after lifting the sanctions further deepening of the Iranian-Chinese interaction is very likely, including within the limits of the SCO after Iran's probable joining this organization. This does not necessarily mean that defense ties between the two countries are in ideal conditions. History shows us that great powers cannot always support their partner states and can be drawn into wars that they had no intention of fighting. Looking



forward, it is possible to see how tactical cooperation between Iran and China—for example on the issue of military and defense—may occur, whereas longer-term, substantial strategic cooperation may still prove elusive. In sum, a combination of Iranian pragmatism and Chinese opportunism kept the defense relationship moving forward.

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## Note

1. In this regard, see: New Era for China's Military Diplomacy, in: [http:// bg.chineseembassy.org/eng/dtxw/t131779.htm](http://bg.chineseembassy.org/eng/dtxw/t131779.htm).
2. Defense Diplomacy Plan, Ministry of Defense (Spain), 2012, p. 16. [http:// www.defensa.gob.es/ gl/ Galerias/ politica/ seguridad- defensa/ ficheros/ DGL- 20120130-Defence-Diplomacy-Plan.pdf](http://www.defensa.gob.es/gl/Galerias/politica/seguridad-defensa/ficheros/DGL-20120130-Defence-Diplomacy-Plan.pdf).
3. For further information in this regard: See, Seyede Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi, Neo-Realism and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (in Persian) **Foreign Policy Journal**, Vol. 21, Spring 2011, pp. 47-48, [http:// fp. ipisjournals. ir/ article\\_ 9333\\_ 1400.html](http://fp.ipisjournals.ir/article_9333_1400.html)
4. Although Tehran doesn't want to be in the shadow of any major power.
5. Bates Gill, Taeho Kim, China's Arms Acquisitions from Abroad: A Quest for 'superb and Secret Weapons', **SIPRI Report**, No. 11, 1995, p vii.
6. Islamic Republic News Agency, MP: Iran-China military exercise helps upgrade regional stability, security, September 23, 2014, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/2738428/>.
7. For more about this idea, see Kayhan Barzegar, China: A Short-Term Solution for Iran, *Iran Review*, January 20 2010 [http:// www. iranreview. org/ content/ Documents/ China\\_ A\\_ Short\\_ Term\\_ Solution\\_ for\\_ Iran.htm](http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/China_A_Short_Term_Solution_for_Iran.htm).
8. See Courtney Bliler, China and Iran's New Love Affair? **National Interest**, July 28, 2015 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-irans-new-love-affair-13434>.
9. See on: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0330/Iran-nuclear-talks-Can-China-keep-negotiations-on-track-video>.
10. A strong statement of this view appeared in a prominent American journal in 2011: "Is China Playing a Dual Game on Iran?" **Washington Quarterly**, 34:1 (Winter 2011), pp. 75-88.
11. In this regard, China has used its arms trade with Iran to entangle its U.S. relations over Taiwan. For example, on 2 September 1992, U.S. president announced the sale of 150 F-15 fighters to Taiwan, and China immediately threatened to sell M-11 missiles to Pakistan and components to Iran. China contends that F-16 and missiles were both arms proliferation, and the U.S. has no right to play a double standard. The U.S. protested that M-11 missile components violate China's commitments to MTCR guidelines and parameters, while China riposted by stating that F-16 sales to Taiwan

violate the 1982 Joint Communiqué dealing with U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Over subsequent years, Chinese officials repeatedly evoked the Taiwan-Iran linkage to justify its continued arms proliferation to Iran. For more, see at: The Washington Times, October 4, 1994 and Lounnas Djallil, “China and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Between Ambiguities and Interests”, **EJEAS**, 2011, pp. 240-244.

12. On the other hand, between 2008 and 2009, taking advantage of the stalled situation, China signed several multi-billion-dollar contracts with Iran in the realm of the oil industry. Although China has a long history of signing contracts without implementing them afterwards, it is nonetheless true that Iran is one of the most important oil suppliers for Beijing, Saudi Arabia being the most important.
13. See on: [http://newspaper.jfdaily.com/jfrb/html/2011-12/26/content\\_721403.htm](http://newspaper.jfdaily.com/jfrb/html/2011-12/26/content_721403.htm).
14. For more, see Lounnas Djallil, China and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Between Ambiguities and Interests, European Journal Of East Asian Studies, **EJEAS**, 2011, No 10, p 248.
15. As "Zheng Wang correctly said, the new version of “Chinese peaceful development policy” in “Xi Era” is “Alternative Diplomacy”. Instead of directly challenging the current existing international institutions, the Chinese are trying to create new platforms that Beijing can control or substantially influence. Through these new initiatives, Beijing aims to create a new international environment that is more favorable to China, one that will limit strategic pressures from the United States. Beijing wants to gradually take progressive, but not provocative, steps forward in these endeavors. See at: Zheng Wang, “China's Alternative Diplomacy”, **The Diplomat**, January 30, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/china-wants-more-military-co-op-with-iran-sorry-us-and-pakistan/>.
16. see on: Defense Ministry's regular press conference on Nov. 27, 2014, [http:// english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-11/27/content\\_6245915.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-11/27/content_6245915.htm).
17. For example, “Missile Technology Control Regime” (MTCR) that established in 1987 “aimed at preventing the proliferation of missile technology. China, Iran and other emerging powers viewed the MTCR as a Western-designed scheme to prevent (potential) adversaries of the U.S. (and Israel) from building air-defenses against bombing campaigns by highly advanced air forces that they themselves did not – yet -- have. And the other hand, in October 1992, Congress passed the Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act, which provided that the U.S. would “oppose and urgently ..... seek the agreement of other nations also to oppose, any transfer to Iran or Iraq of any goods or technology, including dual use goods or technology ... that could materially contribute to either country acquiring chemical, biological, nuclear [weapons] or destabilizing numbers and types of advanced conventional weapons. .... Nations and persons who transferred such goods or technology were to be subject to sanctions. In this regard, see: Willem Van Kemenade, **Iran's Relations with China and the West Cooperation and Confrontation in Asia**, Netherland Institute of International Relations, 2009, pp. 46-48.

18. For a good discussion in this regard, see on: UN arms embargo on Iran, [http://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un\\_arms\\_embargoes/iran](http://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/iran).
19. UN Security Council, **Resolution 1929 (S/2010/283)**, paragraph 8.
20. For example, in 2002 five Chinese companies were sanctioned by the U.S. because of their supply of missile technology to Iran. See (Garver, 2006: 189).
21. A chronology highlighting key moments in the Sino-Iranian arms relationship and the U.S. pressure to disrupt it is shown in: Nori Kasting and Brandon Fite, **“U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Impact of China and Russia”**, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), November 28, 2012, pp. 18-20.
22. In 2007, China secretly sold Saudi Arabia DF-21 solid-fuel, medium-range ballistic missiles. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) quietly sanctioned the deal after confirming that they were not the nuclear-capable variants of the missiles. The U.S. support for the deal stands in stark contrast to previous Sino-Saudi missile deals. Specifically, in the late 1980s Saudi Arabia clandestinely purchased DF-3 missiles from China, which the U.S. later exposed publicly and harshly criticized the deal. For more, see at: Jeff Stein, Exclusive: CIA Helped Saudis in Secret Chinese Missile Deal, 1/29/2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/exclusive-cia-helped-saudis-secret-chinese-missile-deal-227283>.
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## روابط نظامی ایران و چین

مسعود رضایی

دکتری روابط بین‌الملل، دانشگاه آزاد واحد اصفهان

این مقاله به ابعاد استراتژیک و سیاسی روابط دفاعی بین ایران و چین در حوزه دیپلماسی دفاعی توجه دارد. بعلاوه، مقاله حاضر مشخص می‌سازد که چرا دو کشور بدنبال ارتقا روابط خود به سطح استراتژیک هستند. دیپلماسی دفاعی ابزار مهمی در روابط بین‌الملل است و می‌تواند ساز و کار مبنایی مهمی باشد که دیپلماسی دفاعی را به ابزار ژئوپلیتیک مهمی مبدل سازد. با وجود اینکه تحقیقات اندکی در مورد دیپلماسی دفاعی ایران و چین در ادبیات امنیت بین‌المللی وجود دارد، این نوع رابطه اثرات مهمی بر امنیت منطقه‌ای شرق آسیا و خاورمیانه خواهد داشت. این مفهوم - به ویژه بعد از سال ۲۰۱۳ - محرک اصلی روابط پیچیده ایران و چین است و دو کشور مجموعه‌ای از اقدامات اعتمادساز را در روابط نظامی-دفاعی دو جانبه خود انجام داده‌اند. بر این اساس دو کشور بدنبال توسعه پیوندهای سودمند متقابل برای ثبات بین‌المللی و منطقه‌ای هستند. این مقاله به این مسئله می‌پردازد که چین و ایران چگونه می‌توانند بدنبال تمرین‌های نظامی مشترک در دوران ریاست جمهوری روحانی باشند و چرا دیپلماسی دفاعی جمهوری اسلامی به استمرار برنامه نوسازی نظامی با چین وابسته است که می‌تواند امکانات در دسترس نیروهای مسلح ایران را افزایش دهد. با این حال، در این مقاله استدلال شده که به خاطر ملاحظات سیاسی چین و نقش آمریکا، پیوندهای دفاعی چین و ایران ضعیف و سطحی باقی می‌ماند.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** ایران، چین، دیپلماسی دفاعی، آمریکا، پیوندهای نظامی، اتحاد استراتژیک.