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Chinese Perspectives on Sino-Iran Relations

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The American discourse on China's Iran policy by government officials, think tanks, and intellectuals tends to vilify Beijing as a revisionist power.¹ This view of Chinese-Iranian relations is overly simplistic and counterproductive in that it casts China as a threatening Other acting against US security interests rather than an independent state in international society with its own unique policies, goals, and values. The fundamental misreading of China's Iran foreign policy prevalent in Washington is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the narrative results in the securitization of China's activities in relation to Iran, leading to the view that China is part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Second, failure to differentiate between Chinese and US policy goals towards Iran complicates attempts at collective diplomacy either bilaterally or multilaterally. Third, US disregard for China's concerns and values when dealing with Iran will ultimately force Beijing to act unilaterally at the United States' expense. Fourth, continued vilification of China's actions will put Beijing on the defensive and further complicate the United States' attempt to solve the Iran nuclear issue.

Rather than harangue Beijing over its policy choices in regard to Iran, United States government officials and academics would benefit from taking the time and energy to better understand China's strategic viewpoint. Taking China's concerns into account when formulating a policy response to Iran would not only enable the US to leverage China's influence against Tehran, but also improve US-Sino relations by showing Beijing the US is serious about working with China rather than against it. Far from a concession made from weakness, the inclusion of China's concerns in the US strategy towards Iran would strengthen the US negotiating position towards Tehran and undermine Chinese arguments that the US is an aggressive, imperialist power determined to contain China's rise.

To help advance such a shift in perspective and approach, this article will outline China's main strategic concerns regarding Iran. Rather than rely on existing English language academic and government accounts of China's position—which often fail to account for the Chinese perspective—the author will primarily draw on Chinese language government reports, academic journal articles, business reports, and blogs for analysis. In preparation for the article, the author sought the most recent accounts of Sino-Iranian relations as well as those from official

¹ Examples include Public Broadcast System, *Iran Primer: Iran and China*, October 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/10/iran-primer-iran-and-china.html> (accessed on 14 February 2011); Committee of Foreign Relations, *Ros-Lehtinen Statement at Briefing on China*, January 2011, (accessed on 14 February 2011); The Heritage Foundation, *Confront China's Support for Iran's Nuclear Weapons*, April 2006, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/04/confront-chinas-support-for-irans-nuclear-weapons> (accessed on 14 February 2011); Carnegie Endowment, *Is China at Present (or Will China Become) a Responsible Stakeholder in the International Community?*, September 2005, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Blumenthal_Responsible%20Stakeholder%20Final%20Paper.pdf (accessed on 14 February 2011); and, John Garver, "Is China Playing a Double Game in Iran?", *Washington Quarterly* 34:1 (2011), 75-88.

government sources, recognized experts in the region, and institutions with a specialty in China's Iranian foreign policy.

China's Strategic Policy toward Iran

In recent years, the most comprehensive accounts of China's contemporary strategic involvement with Iran have come out of Xinan University's Research Center for Iran Studies (RCIS). Informally established in 1985 by two of China's most prestigious Iranian scholars, Sheng Xugong and Sun Peiliang, RCIS became a government-sponsored center for research excellence in 2008. At present, RCIS is China's premier research center with a focus Sino-Iranian relations and enjoys support from both the local government in Chongqing and from Beijing. RCIS also maintains ties with the Iran government through the Iranian Embassy and the Iranian Culture and Communications International Research Center. RCIS' unique focus and government support suggest its researchers both influence and reflect Chinese government opinion.²

The two main works out the RCIS on Sino-Iran relations in the last two years are Yang Xingli and Chen Lianqing's "Discussion of the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations" and Chen Junhua's "Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era". While strikingly original from one another, they both share what at first seems like pessimism regarding the strength of Sino-Iranian relations.

Professor Yang Xingli, Vice-Director of Xinan University's Research Center for Iran Studies³, and Professor Chen Lianqing, also of Xinan University, point out that "Tehran is a revolutionary Islamic regime opposed to communism as much as imperialism" while "China relies on socialism to develop in the type of state that Iran openly opposes".⁴ The two scholars argue that while "China wants to develop economically, Tehran wants to expand its political and cultural influence to the Middle East and the world".⁵ Lastly, "China is focused on economic development and is intent on 'hiding' its strength (韬光养晦)⁶; Tehran engages in aggressively dialogue and is seeking to develop through its military".⁷

² Shanghai International Studies University, '西南大学伊朗研究中心' (Xinan University's Research Center for Iran Studies) <http://resadm.shisu.edu.cn/s/13/t/13/a/6294/info.jspy>, (accessed 29 August 2011); Wangfang Data, '西南大学伊朗研究中心成立' (Research Centre for Iran Studies Founded in South West University), August 2008, http://d.wanfangdata.com.cn/periodical_xyfz200808012.aspx, (accessed 29 August 2011).

⁴ "伊朗建立起了一个极端独特的伊斯兰宗教领袖执政的神权共和政体...中国目前处于社会主义初级段,其发展的最终目标就是实现伊朗所反对的共产主义." Chen Lianqing and Yang Xingli, '简论伊朗核问题对中国-伊朗关系的影响' (Discussion of the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations), *Journal of Hubei University of Economics*, 7:9, (2010), 79-81.

⁵ "中国发展经济、增强国力的目的是成为现代化的经济强国;而伊朗期望成为在伊斯兰世界及中东地区具有领导权力的国家,进而成为世界强国." Chen Lianqing and Yang Xingli, '简论伊朗核问题对中国-伊朗关系的影响' (Discussion of the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations), *Journal of Hubei University of Economics*, 7:9, (2010), 79-81.

⁶ 韬光养晦 is a Chinese idiom that stresses the need to develop a capability before daring to use it. Since the 1980s, it has been attributed to Deng Xiaoping, who argued that China must refrain from confrontation in order to ensure the peaceful environment necessary for economic development. While Western translations of the phrase tend to focus on the negative connotations of surreptitious development, Chinese scholars argue the concept is more in line with Realism's presentation of power relations. 韬光养晦 has been the driving force behind Chinese foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping. For a detailed account of Chinese

Professor Chen Junhua, Director of Iranian Economic and Geographic Studies at Xinan University's Research Center for Iran Studies and Council Member of the Chinese government sponsored Middle East Research Center, adds Yang and Chen's focus on the disparity between China and Iran by relegating Iran to a 'third-tier' foreign policy concern for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chen Junhua writes, "in terms of national foreign policy priorities, Iran will remain a third-tier concern on the Chinese four-tier scale, officially relegated to a position behind Beijing's relations with the United States (first-tier), and the European Union, Japan, and Russia (second-tier) for the foreseeable future".⁸

Yet, according to Wang Liping of Jiujiang University, "Beijing supports Tehran even when such support translates into a *de facto* aggressive stance against the US".⁹ While Beijing is aware that its Iran policy harms China's global image as a responsible power and complicates Beijing's central domestic priority of 'peaceful development', it has consistently backed Iran despite international pressure not to do so. China's willingness to compromise its role as a responsible stakeholder in international society for the sake of relations with a state it has little in common with raises the question of motivation. Why, indeed, does Beijing support Iran?

The first link in Sino-Iranian relations that provides an answer to this question is the importance China attaches to Iran as an energy provider and trade partner, particularly regarding oil. Chen Junhua notes that Beijing views its relations with Iran as "a central source of China energy security" unique in that Western sanctions prohibit Western states from operating in Iran, thereby leaving the field relatively open to Chinese investment.¹⁰ Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies have taken advantage of the scarcity of foreign actors in Iran's oil sector to secure exploration rights for some of Iran's largest undeveloped oil and gas deposits. Chinese SOE's have invested USD 96 billion in developing Iran's energy industry

historical and contemporary perceptions of the concept, see Wang Yuhong, *韬光养晦: 5000年的成功大智慧 (taoguangyanghui: 500 years of success based on great wisdom)*, Beijing: Haichao Publishing, 2006.

⁷ "目前中国继续发展经济、提升综合国力, 实行韬光养晦的多方位外交... 伊朗主要依靠油气资源走军事强国、宗教领袖的国家道路." Chen Lianqing and Yang Xingli, '简论伊朗核问题对中国- 伊朗关系的影响' (Discussion of the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations), *Journal of Hubei University of Economics*, 7:9, (2010), 79-81.

⁸ "中国与伊朗关系还没有、近期之内也不可能上升到中国对外关系的第一层级 (当前, 中国与美国关系是第一层级; 中国与日本、中国与俄罗斯、中国与欧盟关系是第二层级; 中国与周边邻国, 包括澳大利亚的关系是第三层级; 中国与世界重要的能源、资源储藏国的关系是第四层级, 与其余国家的关系属于第五层级". Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

⁹ "美国与伊朗如今势同水火, 支持伊朗就是反对美国" Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

¹⁰ "而伊朗将是保证我国能源安全的重要来源, 中伊油气合作有助于打开中国能源多元化战略新局面". Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

between 2000 and 2007, helping Iran to become China's third largest supplier of oil, accounting for around 9 percent of all China's oil imports.¹¹

To ensure the security of its energy investments, the Chinese government has provided Tehran with loans and technical assistance to develop its infrastructure. Chinese companies have financed and built power stations, irrigation channels, agricultural projects, chemical plants, rail lines, and metro systems throughout Iran.¹² China has also invested in non-fixed assets such as Iran's banking system. Chen Junhua argues that such economic cooperation is necessary to secure China's energy security in Iran.¹³

Trade between the two states has also grown substantially, both at the state and provincial levels. Between 2000 and 2005, Iran's imports from China grew 360 percent, making China Iran's largest trading partner. China is also Iran's principal military arms supplier.¹⁴

While trade and energy are the most cited motivations behind China's diplomatic support for Tehran, they are only one component of the two states' relations. More relevant to the discussion of China's distinct Iran foreign policy is the issue of anti-hegemony.

Since 1949, China has struggled with its position in international society, often finding itself the target of perceived Western aggression or, more tangibly, Western sanctions. Since 1989, for example, a number of Western states have imposed a transatlantic arms embargo against China, citing Beijing's use of force during the Tiananmen incident as its motivation.¹⁵

Having been at the receiving end of such pressure, China is extremely hesitant to support the US in its endeavor to isolate and punish Iran for its nuclear program. Beijing does not agree with US rhetoric that Iran is an 'evil' state or that Tehran is an 'immoral' regime.¹⁶ Professors Wu Cheng and Ren Futong of Henan Normal University, both widely published Iran relations scholars, argue that Beijing views its relations with Iran not only as economically beneficial, but essential in that "they provide the Chinese government with a degree legitimacy among its Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, who practice a distinctly 'Persian' style of Islam, that it would otherwise not have".¹⁷

¹¹ Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

¹² Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran, '2011年伊朗投资指南之一：伊朗国内经济概况' (2011 Guide to Investment in Iran: Iran's Domestic Economic Situation) 14 April 2011, <http://ir.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/ztdy/201104/20110407498216.html>, (accessed 10 August 2011).

¹³ Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

¹⁴ Zhao Hongwei, et al, '中伊(朗)关系的现状与未来：从政治、经贸、文化多角度的量化研 (Current Situation and Future of the Relationship between China and Iran-Quantitative Research from the Angle of Politics, Economy, Trade, and Culture), *Journal of Chongqing Technology and Business University*, 27:2, (2010), 28-33.

¹⁵ Williem van Kemenade, 'China vs. the Western Campaign for Iran Sanction' *Washington Quarterly*, 33:3, (July 2010), 99-114.

¹⁶ Song Luzheng '中国为什么要支持伊朗?' (Why does China Support Iran?), February 12, 2010, <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/worldlook/1/253978.shtml>, (accessed 9 August 2011).

¹⁷ "新疆地区的伊斯兰文化受到伊朗因素的作用更为独特、深刻和持久。伊朗伊斯兰文化的踪迹在中国伊斯兰教领域是大量存在的, 伊朗因素与中国本土文化整合的方方面面都有新质产生, 使中国伊斯兰文化成为独立于世界伊斯兰文化体

China also views its support for Iran from the perspective of developed versus developing worlds, with Beijing occupying a bridge between the two. In this case, it is possible to understand China's support for Tehran as an extension of the non-aligned movement. As late as 2011, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs equated Beijing's support for developing nations as a legacy of the non-aligned movement, stating that China 'values the development and advancement of its relations with members of the non-aligned movement'.¹⁸

According to Song Luzheng, a popular pro-government blogger who writes on Chinese foreign relations and security, "China can use its support for Iran as a useful bargaining chip with the US so as to secure China's more existential security needs, such as ending US support for Taiwan and the Dalai Lama".¹⁹ When confronted with weapons sales to Tehran, Beijing can point to US arms sales to Taiwan. When chastised for providing diplomatic support for Iran's revisionist government, China can remind the US that it has long provided diplomatic legitimacy to the Dalai Lama, a leader Beijing considers a separatist.²⁰

China also points to US support for Israel as evidence that the US policy position towards Iran is hypocritical. Beijing counters US concerns over non-proliferation by pointing to the US' willful ignorance of Israel's estimated 200-weapon arsenal. Chen Junhua points to the "continual and unconditional support the United States provides to Israel in the Security Council" as evidence that Beijing's support of Iran through the UN is neither revisionist nor particularly novel.²¹ While it is inaccurate to suggest Chinese support for Tehran is a tit-for-tat policy response for perceived US hypocrisy, Beijing does see US support for Israel as legitimizing its own actions in Iran. Beijing's equation of US-Israel to Sino-Iran relations suggests that unconditional US support for Tel Aviv is a strategic liability in regard to China and Iran.

Lastly is the issue of sense of threat, which China does not share with the United States in regard to a potentially nuclear Iran. In contrast to US claims that a nuclear Iran would lead to an unstable Middle East or a possible regional arms race, China views potential US military action in Iran as constituting the largest threat to international stability. Hua Liming, the former Chinese ambassador to Iran, warns that "conflict over Iran could escalate into a Cold War-style great power competition with the potential to undermine the world oil economy and bring major powers into direct confrontation".²² Ambassador Hua's viewpoint is representative of the

系中的一支奇葩, 并据此提出要充分利用宗教的“润滑剂”功能”。Wu Cheng and Ren Futong ‘全国伊朗问题学术研讨会综述’ (Summary of the National Iran Problem Study Seminar) *West Asia and Africa* (2009) 68-69.

¹⁸ “中国重视发展和加强与不结盟运动的关系”。Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, ‘不结盟运动’ (The Non-Aligned Movement), <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gjhdqzz/bjmyd/>, (accessed 9 August 2011).

¹⁹ “伊朗不是不可交易，但需要美国在台湾和达赖问题上做出实质上的让步。否则，中国将会以各种方式对伊朗支持到底。” Song Luzheng ‘中国为什么要支持伊朗?’ (Why does China Support Iran?), February 12, 2010, <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/worldlook/1/253978.shtml>, (accessed 9 August 2011).

²¹ “以联合国大会的投票记一为例，多年来以色列支持美国的议案远远高于其他国家，以色列作为美国盟友的特征十分明显。” Chen Junhua, ‘新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析’ (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

²² “伊朗核问题考验着各大国之间的关系，直接影响国际油价的涨落。” Hua Liming, ‘伊朗核问题与中国外交的选择’ (Iran's Nuclear Problem and China's Foreign Policy Options), *International Affairs Research*, 1 (2007), 58-62.

majority of Chinese government officials and scholars who write on Iran. The sense among Chinese writing that the real threat surrounding the Iran nuclear question comes from potential US-led military action rather than a nuclear Iran is ubiquitous throughout the documents reviewed for this article.

China's US-centric threat perception suggests two things. First, China views the Iran nuclear issue as a domestic security matter for Tehran and not an issue that should be securitized on the international level. Wang Liping argues this point, stating that "sovereignty and national security rights are at the center of China's position", particularly in the face of Western aggression.²³ Second, Beijing does not view a nuclear Iran as an existential threat to its own security and would rather accept a nuclear Iran than a US-led military campaign against Iran. While the Chinese government does not endorse this position, Chinese academics and Chinese media have argued that Iran has a right to develop nuclear weapons and that "a nuclear Iran could contribute to a more robust global balance of power".²⁴

Understanding China's Regional-Level Strategies

China faces two distinct global-regional interfaces with its Iran foreign policy: the Middle East and Central Asia. Beijing's Iran-policy rationale differs within each region.

For China, the Middle East is unipolar and competitive in that the United States is the sole super power in the region capable of projecting military, economic, and political influence into all but a few states.²⁵ While careful not to challenge the United States in the Middle East, China would like to increase its political, economic, and social influence in the region. In this regard, China is best considered a 'reformist revisionist' in the Middle East, in that it accepts some of the established institutions, resists others, and wants to change its overall status.²⁶

Beijing's approach to great-power relations in the Middle East is based on three key ideas. First, China understands that the United States is the sole superpower in the Middle East and that it must maintain good relations with it to assure regional stability. Second, Iran is Beijing's most important regional partner precisely because it does not have good relations with

²³“维护国家的主权与安全是中国核心的国家利益。” Wang Liping, ‘核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择’ (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

²⁴ “伊朗的核武器也有可能成为军事平衡天平的组成部分。” Lin Zhiyuan, “美军为何要实施“空海一体战” (Why does the US military want to Implement an ‘Air-Sea’ Battle Plan?), *US Strategic and Budget Evaluation Center*, 26 February 2011, http://www.china.com.cn/military/zhuanti/wgjsxs/2011-02/26/content_22009595_5.htm (accessed 11 August 2011).

²⁵ Lu Guiping, ‘伊朗核危机激化对我国石油安全的景响’ (The Influence of Iran's Nuclear Program on Our Oil Security) *Legal & Economy*, 5, (2008), 148-149.

²⁶ Barry Buzan, ‘China in International Society: Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?’. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*. 3:1, (2010), 5-36.

the United States.²⁷ Third, China must continue to support Tehran as it cannot afford to ‘lose’ Iran to the United States.²⁸

In contrast, Central Asia is multipolar and competitive, with the United States, China, and Russia all vying for political and economic influence. China enjoys a far greater presence in Central Asia than in the Middle East both unilaterally and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Beijing is intent on expanding its influence into Central Asia but is more satisfied with the region’s institutions. China’s role in Central Asia is that of an ‘orthodox revisionist’.

China’s Middle East Foreign Policy toward Iran

China’s Iran policy in the Middle East is best conceptualized through Beijing’s ‘going out strategy’ (走出去战略), which stresses the need for Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, to invest abroad to effect technical knowledge transfers and secure Chinese access to overseas resources. In this respect, China’s ‘going out’ strategy is by nature outward looking and must work within existing institutions. The Chinese government has faced numerous setbacks in its attempt to expand the global role of Chinese companies due to Western regional monopolies. Beijing has responded by investing in countries with antipathy towards Western nations such as Iran, Sudan, and Venezuela.²⁹

While US commentators often criticize China’s continued support for Iran as a ‘double-game’, Beijing’s perspective is that it is necessarily involved in ‘double-track’ (双轨) diplomacy.³⁰ While a ‘double-game’ suggests an underhanded approach in which the protagonist plays one party off the other, China argues that ‘double-track’ diplomacy stresses the value of bilateral and multilateral partnerships. According to Ambassador Hua, “Beijing does not view its Iran foreign policy as deceptive, but rather sees it as an inclusive attempt to deal with both sides of an issue by engaging with all the actors involved”.³¹

This is not to suggest that Beijing’s intentions are altruistic in nature. As any state, China has its own strategic concerns regarding Iran and the Middle East that shape its regional policy. Through identification of these concerns, it is possible to better understand China’s Middle East policy rationale and counter the US position that Chinese foreign policy towards Iran is

²⁷ Chen Junhua, ‘新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析’ (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

²⁸ Wang Liping, ‘核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择’ (Nuclear Security, Iran’s Nuclear Problem, and China’s Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

²⁹ The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, ‘更好地实施“走出去”战略’ (A better approach to the ‘going out strategy’), March 2006, http://www.gov.cn/node_11140/2006-03/15/content_227686.htm, (accessed 14 February 2011).

³⁰ Chen Lianqing and Yang Xingli, ‘简论伊朗核问题对中国-伊朗关系的影响’ (Discussion of the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations), *Journal of Hubei University of Economics*, 7:9, (2010), 79-81.

³¹ “既然伊朗核问题的核心困难是美伊之间的敌对，既然美伊谈判是解决伊朗核问题的唯一出路，为什么中国不能在美伊之间充当调停者的角色”？ Hua Liming, ‘伊朗核问题与中国外交的选择’ (Iran’s Nuclear Problem and China’s Foreign Policy Options), *International Affairs Research*, 1 (2007), 58-62.

irresponsible. For the United States, such understanding could serve as the starting point of a new Iran strategy that co-opts China's strategic concerns and allows for more leverage against Tehran.

China views the Middle East as a key geopolitical region in terms of global economics, politics, and security and sees expanding its influence in the Middle East as a key national development goal. Yet Beijing understands that it is a latecomer to the Middle East both in terms of political and economic influence and in the energy market. While unrest in North Africa, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen in 2011, and China's growing energy relationship with Saudi Arabia, has the potential to fundamentally alter the Arab world's dynamics, Beijing still believes the US presence in the region is unassailable in the mid-term. To balance the US presence in the Middle East without attempting to erode extant relationships, China naturally looks to Iran.³²

Iran serves as a natural bridge between the Middle East and Central Asia, two areas of increasing importance in China's energy domain (能源版图).³³ Iran straddles the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, two of the world's most vital oil and gas zones. Beijing values Iran's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, through which more than 13 million barrels of oil pass each day, as China would like to establish a naval base near the Strait and views Iran as an ideal location.³⁴ Iran is also a member state of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and can thereby represent China's desires and concerns within the organization.

China's relations with Iran also serve the purpose of balancing the US-Israeli relationship, which China views as one of the strongest in the Middle East as well as one with the most potential to lead to regional instability that would directly affect China's energy and economic security.³⁵ Beijing views the US-Israel block as the dominant security relationships in the Middle East and believes that China's support for Iran could potentially provide an alternative, although lesser, regional power block. While China's relations with Israel have improved since Beijing established formal relations with Jerusalem in 1992, the Chinese government is keenly aware that Israel ultimately shares the strategic concepts, values, and norms of Western international society in relation to the Middle East.

Lastly, Beijing sees China's continued support to Iran, even when it is not in China's greater interest, as essential for limiting US influence over Tehran. Beijing believes that the United States intends to use Iran's nuclear issue as a justification for military action against Iran that would affect regime change. This concern is particularly acute given the US-led invasion of

³² Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

³³ Zhao Hongwei, et al, '中伊(朗)关系的现状与未来: 从政治、经贸、文化多角度的量化研 (Current Situation and Future of the Relationship between China and Iran-Quantitative Research from the Angle of Politics, Economy, Trade, and Culture), *Journal of Chongqing Technology and Business University*, 27:2, (2010), 28-33.

³⁴ Chen Wensheng, 'China's Oil Strategy: 'Going Out' to Iran' *Asian Politics & Policy*, 2:1, (2010), 39-54.

³⁵ Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

Iraq and the resulting negative effects the US presence in Iraq had on China's relations with Bagdad.³⁶

In this regard, according to Professor Li Zhongmin of the Middle East Research Center at Shanghai's Foreign Language University, one of China's lead research institutes on China's place in the Middle East, it is in Beijing's best interest to facilitate a more 'proactive' (积极) policy that leads to a peaceful solution to the Iran nuclear issue. Li writes, "China has been too passive to date, allowing its position in the Iran issue to weaken vis-à-vis the United States and Iran".³⁷ Beijing must, Li argues, break with the current status quo so as to become a central player in negotiations and to increase its overall influence in Iran and with the United States. Li states that a peaceful outcome is necessary so that the United States does not have an excuse to intervene militarily in Tehran (which would undo China's energy gains). Simultaneously, Li argues that maintenance of the status quo or an increase in China's influence is in China's best interest as it is now the dominant great power with a presence in Iran. Beijing's policy reflects this perception. Wang Liping argues that China's strategy towards Iran is best understood as in line with China's "address change through consistency" policy (以不变应万变), which seeks to strengthen China's role in Iran while avoiding US intervention. Wang explains this policy as consisting of "taking a firm stand against nuclear proliferation while staying involved with Tehran and persuading all parties to exercise restraint so that the situation does not spin out of control."³⁸ In this respect, the 'address change through consistency' policy is best understood as Beijing's attempt to pressure Tehran while remaining engaged to help facilitate a change of behavior.

China's Central Asia Strategy for Iran

If China's Middle East policy towards Iran is best conceptualized within the context of China's "go out" policy, Beijing's relations with Iran in Central Asia are more in line with a type of "periphery policy" (周边政策).³⁹ The marked difference between the two policies is, according to Professor Yan Yun of Shihezi University's Law School, that while the "go out" policy seeks to advance China's global relations and grand strategy, Beijing's "periphery policy" focuses on buttressing China's regional and domestic stability by "building on [Beijing's] economic strength to establish good relations with neighboring states".⁴⁰

³⁶ Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

³⁷ "中国事实上一直在被动应对, 而未形成自己的完整对策, 其结果是中国在围绕伊核问题的多边机制中处境尴尬, 美国 and 伊朗方面也都传出不满之声." Li Zhongmin, '关于加强中国热点外交的若干对策思考' (Thoughts on how to improve China's 'hot spot' foreign policy) *Northeast Asian Forum*, 19:1 (2010), 3-10.

³⁸ "就是一方面坚决反对核扩散, 另一方面坚持各方别离开谈判桌。即使制裁生效, 中国也要尽可能劝说各方保持克制, 以保证局面不至于失控。这是中国作为政治大国面对危险国际局势负责任的表现"。 Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

³⁹ Zhao Suisheng. *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior*. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

⁴⁰ "随着中国经济实力的不断增长以及实行“睦邻 安邻 富邻”的周边外交政策”

China's relations with Iran in Central Asia are focused on regional security so as to ensure China's domestic stability. First and foremost of importance in the two states' security relations in Central Asia is the issue of energy security. While energy security is the driving force behind much of China's Middle East policy, Beijing views Iran's role as different in Central Asia.

Beijing sees Iran as occupying a central position between the Middle East, Persian Gulf, and Central Asia that could contribute to China's goal of providing a 'westbound' alternative means of importing oil.⁴¹ At present, more than 80 percent of China's imported oil must pass through the Malacca Strait, which leaves China dependent on (and vulnerable within) US Navy-protected sea-lanes. As part of the two countries' energy cooperation, Beijing has pledged support to Tehran to construct a pipeline in Iran toward to Caspian Sea which it hopes to link to the existing China-Kazakhstan pipeline.⁴² Beijing also hopes to extend a pipeline from Tehran to connect with the China-Pakistan pipeline.⁴³

Beijing plans to invest more than USD \$5 billion into the construction of over 100,000 kilometers of pipeline from Iran through Central Asia. China argues that the project would bring economic benefit to impoverished regions while providing local area governments with much needed infrastructure.⁴⁴ In this respect, Beijing sees the pipelines as an "energy silk road" between China, Central Asia, and the Middle East that would not only lessen its dependency on oil transited by ship, but also deepen its political and economic presence in Central Asia.⁴⁵ Iran would serve as China's regional energy hub both in terms of a supplier and as a conduit for imports from the Middle East and Central Asia.⁴⁶

Cooperation over China's societal security is an equally—*if not more important*—component of Sino-Iranian relations in Central Asia. Relations between the two states in this regard are divided into two types. First, partnership with Iran in Central Asia provides China's presence in the region with a cultural legitimacy it would not have if it acted alone. Iran is a post-colonial state with extensive cultural and social ties throughout Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia's 'newly independent states', and Persian-speaking Tajikistan, which borders

Yang Yun '中亚与中国西部安全环境分析' (An Analysis of Central Asia and China's Western Security Environment), *Tribune of Social Sciences in Xinjiang*, 5, (2009), 35-38.

⁴¹ Chen Wensheng, 'China's Oil Strategy: 'Going Out' to Iran' *Asian Politics & Policy*, 2:1, (2010), 39-54.

⁴² Iran Chinese Radio, '土库曼斯坦-乌兹别克斯坦-哈萨克斯坦-中国天然气输送管道二期工程开工' (Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China Natural Gas Pipeline Begins its Second Phase), December 2010, <http://chinese.irib.ir/index.php/2010-07-25-10-42-26/2010-07-25-10-43-04/25498-2010-12-28-11-44-05.html>, (accessed 14 February 2011).

⁴³ China's Energy News Site, '2011中国国际管道展览会邀请函 (China's International Pipeline Exhibition Invitation), August 2010, <http://www.nengyuan.net/201008/16-619110.html>, (accessed 14 February 2011).

⁴⁴ China's Energy News Site, '2011中国国际管道展览会邀请函 (China's International Pipeline Exhibition Invitation), August 2010, <http://www.nengyuan.net/201008/16-619110.html>, (accessed 14 February 2011).

⁴⁵ China Petrol News Center, '世界最长天然气管道西二线干线投运' (The World Longest Natural Gas Pipeline's Second Main Line Transports), 29 June 2011, <http://www.pbnews.com.cn/system/2011/06/29/001339663.shtml>, (accessed 9 August 2011).

⁴⁶ Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Beijing believes multilateral cooperation with Iran and Russia could provide stability to Central Asia, and China's unstable Western region by proxy, by providing endogenous mechanisms to deal with transnational issues such as drug trafficking, terrorism, and radical Islam.⁴⁷

The second aspect of Sino-Iranian societal security relations is religious cooperation. The Chinese government believes that Islam is at the center of Sino-Iranian cultural relations and has been for two millennia.⁴⁸ Chinese Islam, while distinct from the rest of the Islamic world, draws heavily from Persian culture, with Chinese Muslims having incorporated Farsi into their vernacular.⁴⁹ Beijing believes that direct contact with Iran, which is a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference, could help deal with Muslim extremism in China's western provinces. Toward this end, Beijing encourages religious exchange with Iran both at state and provincial levels. Religious exchanges with Iran are not without a degree of risk for China, as Beijing maintains strict control over its often-restive Muslim population and exchange could, theoretically, lead to great extremism. Both central and local level governments, however, apparently believe the benefits outweigh the risks. In recent years, officials from China's XUAR, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Qinghai Province have visited Iran to establish closer provincial level relations. In 2008, the XUAR entered into a formal provincial level friendship agreement with Iran's Khorasan Province.⁵⁰

China and the Iran Nuclear 'Problem'

While China remains a committed signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in that it regularly states the need to control nuclear proliferation, it does not share the US' sense of urgency towards Iran's nuclear program. Beijing's foreign policy position on the Iran's nuclear issue is to 'address change through consistency' rather than pressure Iran through sanctions or aggressive diplomacy.⁵¹ This policy position stems from Beijing's desire to limit Western influence in Iran, to ensure China's access to Iran's oil, and to protect Chinese economic investment in Iran.

China's 'address change through consistency' strategy towards Iran's nuclear program is composed of five parts. First, Beijing has sought to build on its exclusive relations with Tehran to increase its diplomatic centrality to the issue. China hopes to capitalize on its ties to Iran by

⁴⁷ China Daily, 'Afghan Peace Needs a Map', September 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-09/28/content_8743470.htm, (accessed 14 February 2011).

⁴⁸ Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

⁴⁹ Wu Cheng and Ren Futong '全国伊朗问题学术研讨会综述' (Summary of the National Iran Problem Study Seminar) *West Asia and Africa* (2009) 68-69.

⁵⁰ Zhao Hongwei, et al, '中伊(朗)关系的现状与未来: 从政治、经贸、文化多角度的量化研 (Current Situation and Future of the Relationship between China and Iran-Quantitative Research from the Angle of Politics, Economy, Trade, and Culture), *Journal of Chongqing Technology and Business University*, 27:2, (2010), 28-33.

⁵¹ Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

convincing the West that Beijing alone can keep the communication channel open between Tehran and the West.

Second, Beijing has consistently stated that it supports Iran's right to develop a nuclear capability for energy. Beijing's position in this regard is in line with international law and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which claims Iran's nuclear program is legal so long as it does not attempt to use acquired technology to develop a nuclear weapon. China has long argued that the IAEA should be the lead organization dealing with Iran's nuclear program, not the UN Security Council.⁵² The IAEA's inability to enact punitive measures is more in line with China's policy of non-intervention and non-interference.

Third, China openly states that while it supports Tehran's right to develop a nuclear energy sector, it is opposed to Iran developing a nuclear weapon and has received assurances that Tehran has no intentions of militarizing its nuclear program. While a number of Chinese scholars argue that China is not actually opposed to Iran's developing nuclear weapons, this position provides Beijing with diplomatic cover as it can argue it is acting as a responsible stakeholder in the international community while continuing to develop its economic ties with Tehran. If Tehran does eventually develop a nuclear weapons capacity, Beijing can point to its official position as evidence of its commitment to regional stability.

Fourth, Beijing does maintain moderate pressure on Iran to regulate its nuclear activities while maintaining support for its government. While China does support Iran's right to a nuclear program, it also places more importance on its relations with the United States. Iran remains a third-tier foreign policy priority for Beijing, with the United States its only first-tier concern. According to Professor Wang, Beijing understands that it cannot maintain an entirely neutral position on Iran, as such a role is de facto in opposition to the West.⁵³ Professor Li agrees that Beijing clearly believes that moderate pressure serves the purpose of demonstrating Chinese 'responsibility' while also allowing it to have greater influence to lessen the severity of sanctions levied against Iran.⁵⁴

Fifth, Beijing is determined to demonstrate to the US that the United States/US cannot solve the Iran nuclear problem through military means. China's motivation behind this stance is two-fold. First, China sees regional security, particularly with Iran, as central to its continued energy security. If the US responds to Iran's nuclear program through military action, China's oil imports from the Middle East and through the Persian Gulf would undoubtedly be negatively affected. Second, US military intervention in Iran would undermine China's economic and political influence with Tehran, further marginalizing Beijing from the Middle East. Beijing views both outcomes as having disastrous effects on China's Middle East presence.⁵⁵

⁵² Chen Junhua, '新时期中伊关系特征和战略定位分析' (Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era), *World Regional Studies*, 18:3 (September 2009), 110-118.

⁵³ Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

⁵⁴ ⁵⁴ Li Zhongmin, '关于加强中国热点外交的若干对策思考' (Thoughts on how to improve China's 'hot spot' foreign policy) *Northeast Asian Forum*, 19:1 (2010), 3-10.

⁵⁵ Wang Liping, '核安全背景下的伊朗核问题与中国外交战略选择' (Nuclear Security, Iran's Nuclear Problem, and China's Foreign Policy Strategic Choices) *Leadership Science*, (June 2010), 58-59.

Conclusion

The use of Chinese language sources allows for an understanding of China's foreign policy rationality that is lacking in existing English language texts. Analysis at the international and regional levels clearly demonstrates that Beijing's Iran foreign policy's is based on Chinese global and domestic needs, not in opposition to US interests. While Chinese policy goals may contain 'revisionist' elements from a US perspective, such revisionism is the result of divergent concepts, norms, and values, not of Chinese obstinacy.

Neither, however, is it likely that the insight gained from a survey of Chinese language sources writing on China's Iran foreign policy rational will immediately contribute to a harmonization of Western and Chinese policies towards Tehran. It is clear that China's policy objectives and motivations often conflict with US goals, which suggests that effecting a common policy may be more challenging than US policy makers believe. Moreover, there are aspects of Sino-Iranian relations that are inherently anti-Western and elements of China's policy that depend on continued poor relations between the US and Tehran.

The realization that China's Iran policy contains rationality that runs counter to US strategic interest is, however, a necessary starting point to bridge the gap between the actors involved in negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. US policy makers' tendencies to equate US with international society's norms contribute to a myopic understanding of international affairs, particularly as China's political stature grows in tandem with its economic rise. The US has little to gain in assuming China shares its goals and values and less to gain in vilifying Beijing when its actions diverge from a Western-prescribed path.

The US does, however, stand to gain a great deal if it can bring China to its side in negotiations with Tehran. Without China to insulate Iran from UN sanctions, to absorb its exports, and to invest in its energy sector, Tehran would face greater international pressure than Western sanctions alone can bring to bear. The only way the US can hope to affect this type of multilateral policy is to work with China rather than against it. In this respect, clarity in regard to Chinese intentions and goals will facilitate a more coherent US response to Chinese policy.

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