

# **An Analysis of China's Military Diplomacy towards Iran**

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## **Abstract**

The main goal of this article is to examine the evolutionary process of organizing and advancing China's military relations and arms diplomacy towards Iran. China is now recognized as the most prominent rising power of Asia-Pacific in the international balance of power. In this regard, the authors of the present study, using the formal statements of china's officials and analyzing documents, have sought to answer this question that "what factors affect the formulation and furtherance of China's arms cooperation with Iran"? The hypothesis put forward to answer this question by the present study suggests that "Analyzing China's approach towards military diplomacy and arms cooperation with Iran can be divided into three separate time frames; Since 1979 to 1990, through military cooperation with Iran and besides earning profits and overcoming technological underdevelopment, Beijing sought to contribute to a more balanced distribution of power in West Asia. Until 2012, China adjusted its military engagement with Iran due to the mounting importance of the US parameter in its foreign policy, but since Xi Jinping took office in 2013, China-which now

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sees itself as a major power-has pursued a more strategic approach towards military ties with Iran.

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## **Introduction**

Since the early 1990s, China and Iran, as two ancient Asian civilizations, have for various reasons, developed various levels of military relations in the form of power-building measures such as semi-regular high-level interactions, joint military drills and port visits. The reasons for the deepening of military relations between the two countries can be attributed to various factors, such as Iran's growing need for Chinese weapons, China's special support for Iran's peaceful nuclear program, and the provision of military services by Chinese private and state-owned enterprises to Iran in order to enhance technological capabilities of its ballistic missile systems in terms of range and lethality. Indeed, efforts to engage in cooperation on a variety of issues such as intelligence sharing and security building in the face of US unilateralism and to counteract the transboundary consequences of the activities of fundamentalist and terrorist organizations are another dimension of bilateral military cooperation between Beijing and Tehran.

A study of official statements, and academic sources regarding China's national security suggests that given the existing opportunities and challenges in different periods of time, China's arms policy towards Iran has long been based on differing assumptions; For instance, in the 1980s, the Chinese sought to increase their presence in the strategic region of West Asia through arms cooperation with Iran. In addition to earning money, China was up to attain the military technology from both Western and Eastern blocs indirectly through Iran. However, during the 1990s and 2000s, the Chinese adopted special armaments policies to counter the negative trade balance with Iran caused by the increase

in Iran's oil revenues. In addition, China's political elite sought to deepen the level of arms cooperation with Iran in order to increase pressure on the United States and subsequently divert the international community's attention away from itself. However, it can be said that in recent years, the level and extent of China's military and weapons interactions with Iran have declined for a number of reasons. Among the existing factors are Beijing's unwillingness to limit its relations with Iran and, consequently, to avoid hostility with other regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, Western sanctions imposed on the Iran are seen as another important obstacle that has prevented further deepening of military and arms cooperation between Beijing and Tehran.

In view of the above, by reading Chinese sources, the authors of the present work, using a descriptive-analytical approach are willing to answer the following question:

What factors do affect the formulation and furtherance of China's arms cooperation with Iran?

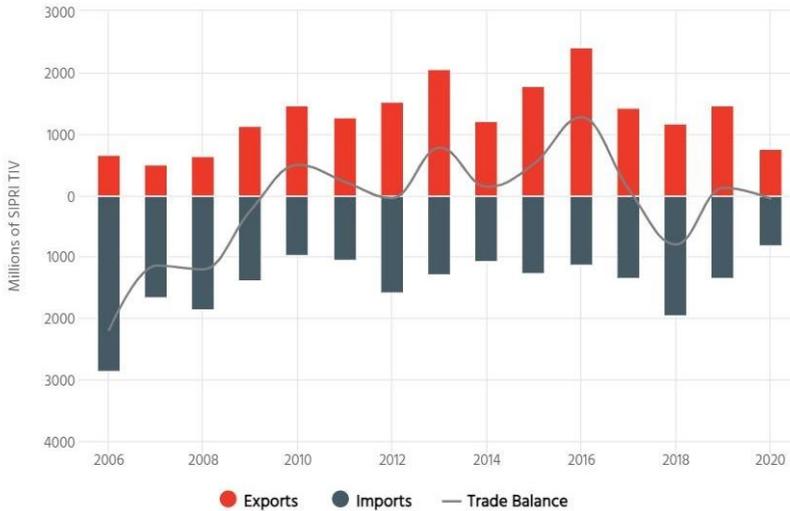
The hypothesis of this essay suggests that China's approach to pursue arms cooperation and military diplomacy towards Iran was generally a bilateral issue up until the mid-1990s. During this period, through military cooperation with Iran, China besides earning profits and overcoming technological backwardness, sought to contribute to a more balanced distribution of power in West Asia. Until 2012, China adjusted its military engagement with Iran due to the importance of the US component in its foreign policy, but since Xi Jinping took office, China-which now sees itself as a major power-has pursued a more strategic approach towards military ties with Iran.

Meanwhile, in order to provide the necessary answer to the aforementioned question, the authors' efforts have been based on scrutinizing the historical course and ups and downs of Sino-Iranian military relations. In addition, evaluation of the nature of Sino-Iranian military ties during the past decades is another practical goal that has been considered in writing the present essay.

## **I- Conceptual Framework**

Military and arms cooperation and the development of military diplomacy have always been one of the most important and influential aspects of international relations since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and the formation of the nation-states. In other words, Military diplomacy can be described as a set of activities carried out mainly by official defense institutions, as well as other state affiliated organizations, aimed at pursuing the national interests of the state in the domains of security and defense policies. Furthermore, the implementation of military diplomacy should be based on the use of bilateral and multilateral negotiations along with other diplomatic measures. (Pajtinka, 2016) Additionally, Military diplomacy has long been an essential component of international diplomacy and an effective way to strengthen bilateral and regional relations. A noteworthy point here is that in the contemporary era, the transfer of arms has become an important dimension of world politics due to the special role it plays; However, it must be acknowledged that the transfer of conventional weapons not only requires the provision of weapons and military equipment, but also entails a large number of military commitments, which in practice can have long-term consequences (Sachar, 2004: 290).

In recent decades, political and military elites of People's Republic of China (PRC) have decided to make fundamental changes to the PRC's arms policy in order to enhance their country's political-military stance in the international power hierarchy. It is noteworthy that due to these domestic transformations, Beijing's strategic approach shifted from the import of conventional weapons to the strategy of exporting indigenous weapons based on a competitive model. An example of this gradual shift is the fact that China is currently trying to be more active in international markets such as Latin America, Africa and Central Asia, thereby narrowing the field to other actual and potential competitors (Raska and Bitzinger, 2020: 91).



**Figure 1: China's Conventional Arms Trade Balance**

source: China power/ CSIS

Although China's military diplomacy and other domains related to it have played an important role in maintaining national security and military development in various historical periods; since the inauguration of 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, it was Xi Jinping that had opened a new chapter in China's development of military diplomacy. From Xi's point of view, military diplomacy remains an important instrument that can be used to advance diplomatic goals, maintain national security, and modernize the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In addition, he states that military diplomacy has such a critical potential that it can be used not only to maintain and improve the level of relations with neighboring countries, but also to deepen the level of military relations with other armies and governments around the world (Cai, 2016: 92). The strategic approach that President Xi talked about is not just a matter of opinion, because in recent years we have seen, in practice, that Xi's government has taken concrete steps to deepen military cooperation with powerful countries such as Russia and the United States.

For instance, in March 2013, Xi Jinping chose Russian

Federation as his first foreign visit destination since taking office. During his trip to Moscow, he visited the Ministry of Defense and the Operations Command Center of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup>In addition, during Xi's tenure, Moscow and Beijing held several joint military exercises called "Maritime Joint Exercise 2013" along with joint counter-terrorism exercises called "Peace Mission 2013". Of course, Xi's adventurism did not end here; because in June 2013, Chinese and American presidents met at the Annenberg estate during which they decided to start a new chapter of bilateral military cooperation based on basic principles such as no military conflict, no confrontation and mutual respect (李, 2014).

But in regard to the defense-security ties between Iran and China, it can be said that over the past decade, the military relations between the two countries, as a result of regional and global dynamics, have entered a new era. In the meantime, the official announcement of "Pivot to Asia" Strategy by former President Barack Obama and rise of Xi Jinping to the highest position of the CCP, both have been among the factors that have accelerated the deepening of the Sino-Iranian relations. A noteworthy point about the impact of Xi's rise to power on the Sino-Iranian military relations is that after seizing executive power in Beijing, he sought to enhance China's military relations with other nations around the world under the banner of "Chinese dream". According to his statements, adopting such a strategic approach requires turning the country's foreign policy from the traditional principle of low-level peaceful development to a more active and comprehensive policy (Rezaei, 2021). According to the aforementioned remarks, since 2013, we have seen that the level of military cooperation between China and Iran has greatly expanded.

## **II- Arms Sales as a Tool for Developing Sino-Iranian Relations**

A review of Beijing-Tehran relations shows that during the eight-

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<sup>1</sup>Xi was the first foreign president to visit Russian ministry of defense

years of Iraq-Iran war, China was named the largest supplier of military equipments to Iran, ahead of the Soviet Union and North Korea. Studies show that since 1982 until 2004, China supplied about \$ 3.8 billion worth of conventional arms to Iran. (Currier & Dorraj, 2009) In addition, it must be acknowledged that China supplied most of Iran's artillery equipments and heavy tanks. On the other hand, Iran provided China with Soviet-made weapons-which it had confiscated from Iraq during the war-and advanced US-made aircrafts (including the Phantom F-4) which had been supplied to Iran under the Shah's regime. In fact, the goal of such collaborations was that China at that time, due to the special strategies it had designed for itself, needed to receive modern military technologies. In this regard, by acquiring aerial refueling technology from Iran, China became able to increase its patrol duration throughout the South China Sea. Iran also sold China a batch of 115 MiG-29s which were flown to Iran by Iraqi Air Force at the beginning of the Gulf War in order to prevent them from being destroyed by the US Air Force (Van Kemenade, 2009: 43).

It also should be noted that military and arms cooperation between Iran and China has long been of a bilateral nature. An example of that, could be represented in the form of military exchanges when, Chinese provided Iran with one of key strategic weapons called the Silkworm anti-ship missiles. The reason for the delivery of these missiles to Iran stems from the fact that at that time most of Iran's oil was exported through the Persian Gulf; while Iraq exported its oil through pipelines stretching from Turkey to countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. With the presence of US navy in Persian Gulf at that time, the balance of power was in favor of Iraq, while Iran was largely empty-handed to retaliate against Iraqi attacks. Thus, in 1986, China entered into a \$ 3.1 billion worth of arms deal with Iran, which included the HV2 silkworm anti-ship missiles. In this line, the Chinese anti-ship missiles changed the balance of power in Iran's favor, as they provided for more effective attacks on hostile ships and tankers in the Persian Gulf. At that time, however, China had officially denied

selling silkworm missiles to Iran, yet the United States, for the first time since normalizing relations with the PRC, not only imposed sanctions on China over the sale of this specific type of missiles to Iran in 1987, but even threatened to carry out preventive airstrikes (Garver, 2006: 205-206).

It should be noted that the level of military relations between Iran and China has not been limited to the purchase and sale of military equipments, and has been expanded to cover technology transfer as well. The Sino-Iranian agreement to transfer military technology came into effect when, in 1987, the G7 established a multilateral treaty called the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) to prevent the proliferation of missile technology. Although China later largely accepted the MTCR's commitments and even demanded full accession in 2004, in the early years of implementing the agreement with Iran, Beijing supported its approach with various technical and political arguments. As a result of further negotiations, in the mid-1990s, China provided Iran with a new generation of much more sophisticated C-801 and C-802 anti-ship missiles. Also, 150 C-802S missiles were about to be delivered to Iran, of which only 75 were finally delivered in 1997 due to the US pressures. Years later, Iran succeeded to commence the domestic production line of these missile systems. In addition, China also provided Iran with a number of anti-ship missile launch pads, offensive speedboats, mines and helicopters (Garver, 2006: 181-183).

Following the previous cooperations, in 1997, Iran and China signed an agreement worth about \$ 4.5 billion on the transfer of military technologies, one-third of which included transferring ballistic missile technology to Iran. China had also agreed to assist Iran in setting up factories to produce missile systems (missiles with a range of 800 to 1,240 km that could reach US military bases in Turkey or Israel), helicopters, artillery, aircrafts, rocket launchers, armored vehicles and trucks. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the third Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-1996 provided the necessary prelude to a new round of negotiations between China

and the United States. In the wake of these talks, which coincided with Jiang Zemin's visit to the United States to meet Bill Clinton, Beijing promised to halt all nuclear cooperations with Iran, in return for authorization of sale of American nuclear reactors to China and relative cessation of US political pressures on PRC over the matters such as Taiwan and human rights. At that time, US was concerned that the dimensions of Iran's nuclear program can eventually be expanded to cover military purposes and Chinese nuclear assistance could further encourage such a possibility. Reports claim that even before Jiang's visit to US, Beijing made assurances to Washington that it will no longer provide Iran with anti-ship cruise missiles such as C-801 and C-802 (Erlanger, 1997). Moreover, even China's former foreign minister, Qian Qichen, wrote a confidential letter to former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announcing the cessation of all Chinese nuclear assistance to Iran (Smith, 1997). In addition, it must be acknowledged that, as another result of this round of talks, the strategic, political and nuclear cooperations between China and the United States significantly expanded. This expansion included China joining the Zanger Committee, which oversees the export of nuclear technology, the implementation of the 1985 US-China nuclear cooperation agreement, lifting of previous US sanctions against China over arms sales to Iran and Pakistan, China's adherence to the MTCR and even cooperation in launching commercial satellites (Van Kemenade, 2009: 53-54).

### **III- China and Contemporary Iranian Military Doctrine**

As highlighted in the previous paragraphs, one of the important aspects of Sino-Iranian military cooperation is technology transfer. In this regard, it can be explicitly acknowledged that China has played an important role in Iran's military modernization and consolidation of Iran's military doctrine. China played an important role in launching Iran's indigenous military-industrial sector by selling missile systems directly to Iran. According to researchers at the Rand Corporation, Chinese design and technology can be found in many series of Iranian missiles; from "Oghab" and "Naze'at"

short-range ballistic missile systems to "Shahab" long-range ballistic missile system. For instance, the Naze'at tactical ballistic missile was developed in cooperation with China in Iran. These missiles, which use solid fuel and have a range of about 100 km, were built by a group led by Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam during the Iran-Iraq war and played an important role in Iran's military doctrine against Iraq at that time (Wright, 2011: 106).

In addition, Iran has developed its relatively sophisticated anti-ship cruise missiles with the help of China. For example, the development of the high-precision Nasr anti-ship cruise missile system, equivalent to China's C-704 missile is also the result of technical cooperation between Iran and China (Harold and Nader, 2012: 6). The inauguration of the production line of the first series of this missile system was announced after its successful test in 2010. At present, ballistic missiles and naval capabilities are two of the main components of Iran's military doctrine. Since Iran lacks an advanced air force and is unable to overcome this challenge to the sanctions and their subsequent financial and technological difficulties, pursuing the development of various ballistic missile systems and enhancement of their accuracy is essential to establish deterrence against foreign threats especially United States and its regional allies.

In addition to the above, another important issue regarding the impact of Sino-Iranian missile and naval cooperation is that China cooperates with Iran by upgrading its anti-access/Area denial system; a cooperation which increased Iran's deterrent capabilities substantially. Additionally, Iran has not only relied on China to upgrade its anti-access/area denial weapon system, but this cooperation has also provided a suitable foundation for technology transfer. According to some researches, China's continued support for Iran's "A2 / AD" military program indicates that it sees Iran as a key partner in West Asia. In other words, China considers Iran as a revolutionary state which can force the United States to keep its political attention, financial resources and military presence away from the East Asia (Gentry, 2013). The following is a list of some

Iranian cruise and anti-ship missile systems that have a Chinese equivalent; missile systems which with a strong possibility were produced in Iran as an outcome of Sino-Iranian cooperation:

**Table 1: Iranian Cruise Missile System and Their Chinese Equivalents**

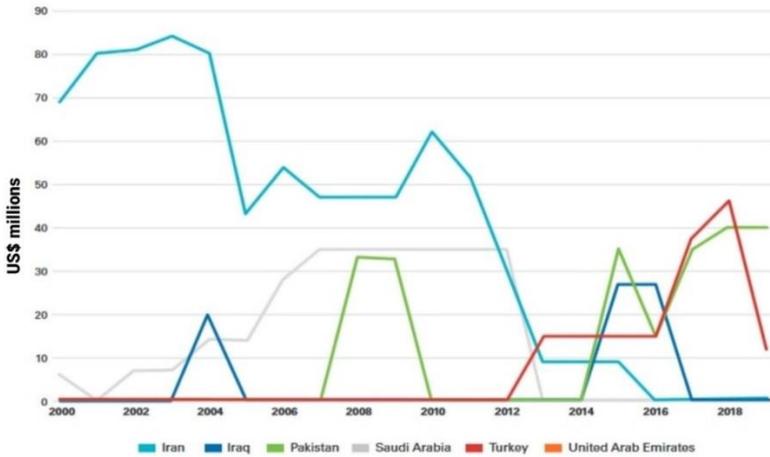
Development in Iran	Properties	Chinese equivalent	Cruise missile
Late 1990s	Noor-1 missile with an effective range of 40 km (based on C801 technology)/ Noor-2 missile with an effective range of 170 km (based on C802 technology)	C801-C802	Noor
2004	Effective range of 15-20 km /can be guided via radar or television signal	C701- TL-10	Kowsar
2004	effective range of 360 km/ equipped with radar and infrared guidance system	HY-2	Raad
2010	Approximate range of 170 km and radar guidance system	C704	Nasr
2011	Effective range of 200 km/ equipped with radar guidance system	C802-C803	Ghader
2012	effective range of 40-75 km (based on China's C704 and C705 missile systems)/ radar-guided	C704-C705	Zafar

(Gentry, 2013)

#### **IV- International Sanctions and China's Arms Sales to Iran**

Although China's military sales to Iran in the 2000s often continued directly and indirectly through the channels of the third-party states, the level of official Sino-Iranian arms trade has declined steadily since 2005 (Wuthnow, 2015). In this regard, some scholars have attributed this type of reduction in military cooperation largely to

Beijing's decision to prioritize its more strategic relationship with Washington over that of Tehran (Harold and Nader, 2012: 6). This argument may seem somewhat plausible at the time when China had reached to some sort of mutual understanding with the United States in 1997, but as we move away from 1997, the resumption of arms deals between the two countries is again largely on the rise.



**Value of Arms Imports of West Asian Countries Figure2:**

source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Furthermore, another factor influencing Sino-Iranian military cooperation seems to have been the adoption of UN sanctions against Iran's nuclear program in the 2000s, which placed severe restrictions on the development of Sino-Iranian arms relations, especially in sensitive areas such as nuclear and missile technologies. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Iran remained China's second-largest arms customer after Pakistan with an 8% share until 2010, but since 2005 no official order has been placed between the two countries. The numerical value of the remaining arms trade, according to the Chinese authorities, was the delivery of orders whose contracts were concluded before 2005, so their delivery to Iran did not

constitute a violation of international sanctions.

In addition, it must be acknowledged that China has not exported drones to Iran in all these years, while providing various types to Pakistan or Iran's regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE; equipments that they use in the war in Yemen against the Houthis, one of Iran's key allies in the region. China has not yet welcomed the launch of a newer dimension to its co-operation with Iran. However, this policy has been pursued by Pakistan in the production of the third-generation Chengdu G10 fighter jets and the production of CH4 drones. similar cooperation has been initiated with Saudi Arabia for the production of the same drones (Greer & Batmanghelidj, 2020: 18-20). Even after the conclusion of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and the announcement of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China, China's arms cooperation with Iran has not returned to normal. Of course, this reduction in Chinese arms exports to Iran is only one part of the story, and in all these years the military cooperation between the two countries has probably continued informally to the extent that even Chinese companies have repeatedly been punished for violating Iran's arms embargo.

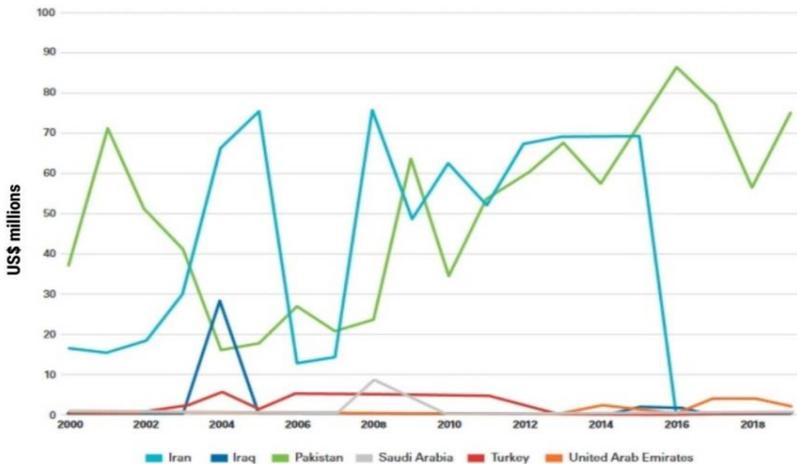


Figure 3. China's Share of Total West Asian Arms Imports from 2000 to 2019

## Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, from 2002 to 2011, China's total conventional arms sales to Iran reached \$ 727 million, making China the second largest arms supplier to Iran (after Russia) and Iran the second largest arms market for China. In addition, between 2008 and 2011, when Russian arms exports to Iran declined sharply, China replaced Russia and became the largest supplier of arms to Iran (SIPRI, 2012). October 18, 2020, marks the day of lifting 13-year UN arms embargo on Iranian military as a provision of UNSC Resolution 2231. Former president Trump administration's serious efforts in August of that year to extend Iran's arms embargo in the UN Security Council was unsuccessful as China, along with Russian Federation, voted against the resolution. Furthermore, in the text of the informal draft of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Program, which was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries in spring 2021, there are provisions that promise joint production of military equipments as part of the broader cooperation between the two countries.

In addition to the above, one should mention cyber and satellite dimensions of cooperation between the two countries. According to Mohammad Keshavarzzadeh, Iran's ambassador to Beijing, China has agreed to give Iran access to BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (Mehrnews, 2021). Using BeiDou technology, Iran can greatly increase the accuracy of its guiding cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, UAVs and other military capabilities. Also, due to the extensive trade relations between the two countries in the field of telecommunications and the extensive influence of Chinese Telecom companies in Iranian market, the vastness of Sino-Iranian cooperation in the domains of Internet, cyber security and information technology has been expanded as well. For example, Mahmoud Vaezi, Iran's former Minister of Information and Communications Technology, during his visit to China in 2015, met with Lu Wei, China's Chief Executive Officer for Cyber Security and Internet Policy, and Miao Wei, Chinese Minister of

Industry and Information Technology. As an outcome of these meetings, the two countries agreed that year to set up a specialized working group to develop national information networks. China also agreed to finance some of these projects in Iran (Financial Tribune, 2015).

## **V- China and Disputes over Iran's Nuclear Program**

Mounting oppositions to Iran's nuclear program from the United States and its European allies in the past two decades resulted in severe repercussions for Iran which gradually spilled over its relations with China. As one of the consequences, imposition of international sanctions made it harder for Beijing to continue its cooperations with Tehran; especially in military domain. Therefore, analyzing Sino-Iranian military relations necessitates to have a closer look at China's role in Iran's nuclear dispute.

While support for Iran's nuclear program was a key element in Beijing's efforts to strengthen cooperation with Tehran in the 1980s and 1990s, it was finally in 1997 that China abandoned its arms cooperation with Iran under intense US pressure (Garver, 2006). Following the referral of Iran's case of nuclear program to the UN Security Council, China voted in favor of six UN Security Council resolutions against Iran and complied with all the international sanctions against that country since 2012. China has also been actively involved in the nuclear negotiations with Iran as a member of P5+1 group of countries. On the other hand, after US withdrawal from JCPOA under Trump's administration and reimposition of sanctions on Tehran, China despite pursuing political opposition against what it considered as US unilateralism, has largely adhered to US sanctions regime. Of course, alongside this approach, China, by continuing its oil imports from Iran and also establishing unique informal financial arrangements in order to salvage bilateral trade exchanges, has managed to preserve economic relations with Iran. Signing the Sino-Iranian 25-year cooperation program in Tehran by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in the spring of 2021 and supporting Iran's permanent

membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are two other signs of Chinese relative resistance against US pressures in the past years. It is undeniable that parallel pressure imposed by US on China in the past years regarding a variety of issues such as trade relations, South China sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan, have also provoked Beijing to continue the ongoing Sino-Iranian convergence.

In Chinese scientific and political circles, there are two broad and narrow views on this question that how China should deal with the Iranian nuclear dispute; Some traditional forces, including scholars, the military officers, and even some diplomats, believe that China has a history of friendship with Iran, both in the imperial and modern eras, and that there has been no serious conflict between the two nations. therefore, for safeguarding its regional and political interests, China must continue its close relationship with Iran. Although this view does not necessarily follow the views of the majority, it is largely influenced by Mao's "Three Worlds Theory", which believed that international relations consisted of three political-economic worlds: the first world, the superpowers; The Second World, the allies of the superpowers; And the Third World, the nations of the Non-Aligned Movement. Mao believed that China is a member of the Third World and should not follow the superpowers, according to which China's policy towards Iran should be based on mutual interests and not be influenced by the interests of other countries, especially the superpowers (Hongda, 2011: 54). There is also a narrow view in Chinese decision-making circles that stands for a more favorable relation with the United States at the expense of convergence with Iran. This view endorses closer ties with Iran's main opponent, the United States. Proponents of this approach, influenced by Western theories of international relations are diplomats in contact with Western countries, and some younger generations under the influence of western media. (Hongda, 2011: 56) They also believe that China has far greater interests in the Arab world, especially since China's interest in securing energy resources depends on maintaining political

stability throughout the region and therefore should not be limited to the Iranian supply of oil and gas (磊, 2009: 83).

A positive approach to cooperation with Iran has emerged after the rise of President Xi Jinping to the highest office in Beijing and subsequently pursuing his ambitions to enhance China's position in international system to the great power status in the form of what he called as 'New Type of Great Power Relations'. According to Xi's worldview, China should pursue an active foreign policy and refrain from previous cautious and conservative policies. This new approach is most evident in the remarks made by Chinese state councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Second World Peace forum on June 27, 2013. He implies:

"China is ready to meet the expectations of the international community about its responsibilities and to play a greater role in world peace and common development,"

In addition, Wang stated that China is ready to apply Chinese experience and knowledge in international relations and take the lead by offering public goods and greater participation in global governance (Hong, 2014: 410). Hua Liming, former Chinese ambassador to Tehran, also believes that China, as a major responsible power, should take a step beyond its traditional diplomatic cliché of non-interference and play a more positive role in the issue of Iran's nuclear program-alongside the United States-. (2007). In addition, turmoil and uncertainty will still overshadow regional politics throughout West Asia for the decades to come, and China should play a more active role in the affairs of this region as a responsible actor, thereby establishing the image of a great power for itself (华, 2014: 4).

It is noteworthy that within the framework of Beijing's new doctrine, China tries to play the role of a mediator in resolving the US-Iranian conflict. The reasons for china for trying to play as a mediator in the Iranian nuclear crisis are of significant importance. First of all, the international community wants China to take responsibility as a great power, therefore playing a constructive role-or at least pretending to do so in the nuclear talks can be a

lucrative instrument to depict a responsible and credible face for China. Furthermore, the preservation of China's national interests, Iran's geographical importance and its prominent position in the world energy market are among the factors that require China to pursue a more active role. This approach contributes to China's foreign policy strategy for peaceful development and also enhances its international standing (谢, 2009).

On the other hand, China must participate in resolving the Iranian nuclear dispute, because the regime that will eventually be put in place to resolve this issue will have profound consequences for China itself. In other words, the regime can gradually become the international non-proliferation standard in similar conflicts in other parts of the world, even in China's periphery, including towards Japan or Vietnam and the Philippines, which have also serious nuclear programs (赵, 2015). This approach, while emphasizing the responsibility of China's status as a great power, by adhering to the three principles of "non-proliferation", "peaceful settlement of disputes" and "separation of politics and economics" opposes US politicization of the Iranian nuclear dispute and also calls for a balance between China's national interests and its international responsibilities (吕, 2013: 669).

Thus, in line with China's strategic culture, by pursuing a balanced policy, The PRC will not side with any of the parties to the conflict in West Asia. On the one hand, it is committed to establishing a new kind of great power relationship with the United States, and on the other, it maintains its relations with Iran and refuses to choose between Washington and Tehran (Shen, 2006: 63). By pursuing such a diplomacy, China realizes its energy interests, portrays itself as a great power, secures its strategic interests (including preventing Western powers from monopolizing West Asia, balancing relations with the United States and Iran, and also expanding Chinese influence) and finally preserves the principle of foreign policy independence (孙; 刚, 2016: 3). In addition, it must be acknowledged that adopting such an approach can be categorized as some sort of a "strategic hedging" which

means reducing and controlling existing risks in the midst of competition between regional and extra-regional powers (Garlick and Havlová, 2020: 1).

However, it can be said that the Iranian nuclear dispute has created significant opportunities and challenges for China's foreign policy in West Asia and even in its relations with major powers. Therefore, as international pressures against Iran have mounted, Chinese leaders, considering some critical aspects of their national interests such as the importance of maintaining their reputation as a responsible stakeholder, have adjusted their policy of energy and economic cooperation with Iran. Influenced by this approach, the pattern of China's foreign policy toward Iran underwent some sensitive changes.

## **VI- Sino-Iranian Military Diplomacy**

Indeed, the development of military diplomacy is seen as an important and integral part of China's foreign policy towards Iran. In fact, this policy has expanded with high-level meetings between both sides' military leaders and unprecedented port visits with the participation of the two countries' navies and finally holding joint bilateral and multilateral military exercises. The period of military diplomacy between the two countries was at its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but after the comprehensive dialogues between China and the United States in 1997, one could witness a fundamental stagnation in this particular dimension of relations. Since then, and especially since 2003 up until 2013, only a handful of high-level meetings between the military leaders of the People's Republic of China and the Iranian army have been reported. Although more or less military engagement and bilateral meetings between senior Chinese military and security officials and Iran continued after the 1990s, it did not regain its former prosperity and it was only after the beginning of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 that the bilateral military diplomacy flourished once again.

For instance, former Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan traveled to China in May 2014 to meet Fan Changlong,

deputy chairman of the Central Military Commission, Yang Jiechi, senior diplomat and director of the central foreign affairs commission, and Chang Wanquan, Minister of Defense. A few months later, Habibullah Sayari, the commander of the Iranian Navy, visited China in October 2014. This is the first visit of the Commander of the Iranian Navy to the People's Republic of China. In October 2015, Admiral Sun Jianguo, Deputy Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army, traveled to Iran and signed two military memorandums of understanding in the fields of defense, training, technology, intelligence, cyber, and counter-terrorism (Reuters, 2015). With Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in 2016, all those MOUs became part of the general agreement between Iran and China. In November 2016, for the first time, during the visit of Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan to Iran, a military cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries' defense ministers, which included military exchanges, joint counter-terrorism training, as well as joint military exercises. During this visit, the two sides agreed on the establishment of joint technical and industrial commission along with the joint military commission, the first meeting of which was held in September 2017 in Beijing. The Technical and Industrial Commission covers Sino-Iranian Defense Industry Issues and arms sales, while in the Joint Military Commission, issues such as military training and exercises were to be discussed. (Rezaei, 2021) In September 2018, Amir Hatami, Iranian Minister of Defense, traveled to China at the invitation of his Chinese counterpart and at the head of a high-level defense delegation. In September 2019, Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, also led a high-level delegation to China and met with several officials from the Ministry of Defense and the People's Liberation Army, as well as the Central Military Commission. In December 2019, with the visit of Shao Yuanming, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA to Tehran, the second joint military commission of the two countries was held.

Additionally, over the past ten years, China has conducted three joint military exercises and port technical cooperations with Iran.

The first case was in 2014; when two Chinese warships, including the Changchun destroyer, visited Bandar Abbas and conducted joint exercises focusing on maritime security and the fight against piracy. This happened after the Iranian navy helped free the Chinese cargo ship from pirates in the Gulf of Aden. The second case, which occurred in 2017, involved an Iranian destroyer and two Chinese destroyers conducting four days of naval exercises in the eastern part of the Strait of Hormuz. The third exercise was held in December 2019 as a tripartite exercise with the participation of Russian Federation. These exercises, officially called the “Marine Security Belt”, took place in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. It is noteworthy that China's military engagement in West Asia is not limited to Iran. Since 2010, China has held joint exercises and port cooperations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan and Turkey. China has held 20 exercises with Pakistan alone since 2010. In 2010, China even held its first joint exercise with a NATO member, Turkey. China has also tried to establish a kind of balance in its military interactions with Iran and other key actors in the region which can be proved by scrutinizing China's strategic pattern of military cooperation towards West Asia. In this line, in the two years of 2017 and 2019 that China held military drills with Iran, it also conducted similar military drills with Saudi Arabia as well. At the same time, the nature of this type of Chinese military diplomacy is different from that of Iran and other West Asian countries. China conducted the first type of multilateral military diplomacy in the region in the form of a joint military exercise with Iran and Russia. With the exception of China's military diplomacy with Iran, its interactions with the rest of West Asia are influenced by their complex ties with the United States. The United States is so sensitive to its West Asian partners' military interactions with China. For instance, Washington-concerned about the possibility of China's acquisition of US technology-prevented Turkey from flying F-16 fighter jets during the course of the joint Sino-Turkish military exercise. (Kemal, 2010) Through various political and economic leverages,

Washington also tries to discourage West Asian states from conducting joint military cooperations with China. On the other hand, China is not pursuing military cooperation with west Asian countries in order to replace the US military presence in the region. On the contrary, CCP considers the continuation of US military presence in West Asia in line with China's national interests; because as long as US Financial, military and human resources are preoccupied with security challenges in the Middle East, Washington will have less capabilities to use in order to balance China in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, in the past two decades, US presence in West Asia created a security umbrella under which China could pursue its economic and trade interests as a free rider without shouldering any security responsibility. US withdrawal from the region therefore can create a power vacuum which at least in the short run brings instability, uncertainty and unpredictability to the region. However, China sees Iran as a key regional partner in West Asia which has lots of strategic commonalities with. Both China and Iran consider each other as key partners in order to balance what they see as US unilateralism. Tehran considers Sino-Iranian convergence as a key instrument to escape US coerced isolation and also to neutralize sanctions reimposed by US after the withdrawal from JCPOA. On the other hand, China sees Iran as a Key West Asian partner which unlike other regional actors has a much more independent foreign policy. But still there are key factors which make Beijing reluctant about reckless improvement of bilateral relations with Tehran. Instead, China is in favor of a more moderated relations with Iran which can improve gradually if the CCP believe that international environment provides the necessary space to do so. Finally, due to the undeniable political and security dependence of some other West Asian states to the United States which makes it difficult for china to pursue closer military ties with them, China has a much more practical freedom in military contact with Iran; an option which provides China with a leverage to put pressure on the United States in the region (Greer & Batmanghelidj, 2020: 16-17).

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned in the present essay, it is clear that the history of Sino-Iranian military relations dates back to the time of the eight years' war with Iraq; At a time when Iran was under a severe arms embargo and subsequently Tehran was struggling to find any military supplier which could provide it with military equipments, necessary to deter Iraqi offensives. During this period, China provided Tehran with military equipments in order to maintain the regional balance of power in a way that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union could prevail over West Asian politics. Furthermore, in the last two decades, military relations between Iran and China have flourished and as a result, Tehran can be named as a key recipient of Chinese weapons. But there also have been a number of obstacles which made it harder for Beijing to extend-or even to maintain- its military relations with Tehran. The International sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program and the following arms embargo made Beijing reluctant to extend military ties with Tehran. But with the rise of Xi Jinping in Beijing, China found Iran as a key leverage against the United States, a view which encouraged the two countries to broaden their relations.

Military cooperation between Iran and China gives Beijing an opportunity to provide it with a place in the region, which has been the sphere of influence of the United States for decades. Supporting the regular meeting of the Joint Commission for Cooperation of National Defense Industries, conducting joint naval, land and air exercises and expanding cooperation in the field of technology and defense industry for the purpose of joint production of military equipments have been among the areas in which the two countries have cooperated in recent years.

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