

Is America on a Collision Course with China over Iran?

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The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Tehran in January 2016 laid the foundations for a future partnership agreement. He stated that he sought to open a “new chapter” in China’s relations with Iran. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, “The Islamic Republic will never forget China’s cooperation during the sanctions era.”

In July 2020, ‘New York Times’ reported it had acquired an 18-page document titled, ‘Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’, which concluded a long-term trade and military negotiations between China and Iran – and would see China invest \$400 billion over the next 25 years in Iran.

It would “vastly expand Chinese presence in banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects” and allow China to receive Iranian oil at a reduced price in order meet its growing energy needs. The opening statement of the document reads, “Two ancient Asian cultures, two partners in the sectors of trade, economy, politics, culture and security with a similar outlook and many mutual bilateral and multilateral interests will consider one another strategic partners.”

There are many benefits for Iran with the partnership. Although not a member of the strategic Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which includes Iran’s neighbour, Pakistan, the potential for increased opportunities with China with the current arrangement makes achieving SCO membership less of a priority. In return for cheaper Iranian oil exports and other concessions, China injects billions of dollars into its struggling economy. China is now Iran’s largest trade partner, its largest oil purchaser, and its largest foreign investor. With Iran’s economic isolation due to American led sanctions, China provides a much-needed lifeline.

The ‘Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ agreement has caused considerable alarm for America. China may be seen as undermining America’s plan to isolate Iran and this places China on a direct collision course with America. When the Trump administration pulled America out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’, in 2018, it imposed stricter sanctions on Iran, threatening countries with punishment if they did any business with Iran.

Previously, one of the main factors constraining China's relationship with Iran may have been the attitude of America. In July 2020, the American based 'Center for Strategic and International Studies' had argued that the enhanced partnership could be the prelude to a serious Chinese challenge to the American position in both the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean region. China is now defying America's position on Iran.

In December 2020, 'The Wall Street Journal', claimed Iran had circumvented American led sanctions and "exported more oil to China and other countries in recent months, providing a lifeline for its struggling economy and undermining the Trump administration's so-called maximum pressure campaign against Tehran." On 26 January 2021, the Chinese newspaper, 'Global Times' reported that China's top legislator, Li Zhanshu, called for closer ties with Iran, "China stands ready to work with Iran to implement the important consensus reached by the two heads of state and promote the continued development of the China-Iran comprehensive strategic partnership."

Some observers argue American obsession with Iran is about securing access to Iran's abundant resources, oil and natural gas – and without a compliant Iranian leadership, this is difficult. America has implemented many measures to create the conditions to bring about the right leadership. Strict and severe crippling economic sanctions against the people of Iran in the midst of a global pandemic remains in place. This has the potential to create the conditions for civil unrest that could see the Iranian leadership fall. The sanctions amount to one of America's many ruthless and vicious policies in the Middle East.

In 2017, writer and journalist, Andrew Buncombe, penned an article for the British newspaper, 'The Independent' – and probably summed up the opinion of many. Describing the impact of American intervention and policies in the Middle East he argued, "millions of people's lives have been turned upside down, Isis has been allowed to fester and spread, and Iraq is a nation at risk of fracturing apart. Moreover, an untold number of innocent civilians have been killed – by disease, illness, in gruesome tortures performed by local and foreign insurgents, and by the US and UK-led military campaign."

With regards to the behaviour of China and Iran, there is widespread global outrage over horrifying reports of China's treatment of Muslim Uyghurs, which includes claims of genocide, systemic rape, mass incarceration, slave labour and forced sterilisation – and Iran is the cause of destabilisation in the Middle East, it has been argued.

At the start of this year, Reuters reported Britain's Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab and America's Secretary of State, Antony Blinken were in talks regarding how to deal with Iran's "destabilising behaviour" and to hold China to its international commitments. America's National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, asserted China, Afghanistan and Iran key priorities for the new administration.

Earlier this month, the US President Joe Biden confirmed America would not lift its economic sanctions on Iran in order to get Tehran back to the negotiating table to discuss how to revive the 'Iran Nuclear Deal'. Iran's leadership has demanded America lift all sanctions before any negotiations take place.

China has been crucial in assisting Iran escape deep isolation and rejoin the global economy through the conclusion of the 'Iran Nuclear Deal'. With its multi-dimensional partnership with Iran, China presents a direct challenge to America. Both nations risk falling into the deadly 'Thucydides's Trap' – and Iran could become the battleground between a rapidly

ascending power and an established power.

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