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**Return to the Nuclear Agreement with Iran: Will China Facilitate
United States Measures?**

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China has renewed its proposal to convene an international meeting of all parties to the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA), including the United States, with the goal of discussing the US return to the agreement. On the eve of the first telephone conversation between the US and Chinese Presidents (February 11, 2021), the special US Envoy for Iran issue and the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister considered ways to coordinate moves on the JCPOA. Active mediation on the Iranian nuclear issue may be part of a broader Chinese policy aimed at promoting cooperation with the Biden administration on essential issues to the United States in exchange for preservation of China's core interests, and as part of its position as a permanent member of the Security Council. China presumes that Israel will continue to oppose an agreement with Iran and will not support Beijing's moves. Israel, for its part, should closely monitor China's moves, coordinate its policies with the United States and the Gulf states, and seek to promote dialogue at the level of the Chinese leadership, while strengthening direct contact with senior diplomats dealing with the Iranian issue.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson renewed (February 9, 2021) China's proposal to convene an international meeting of all parties involved in the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA), including the United States, to discuss a roadmap to the United States' return to the agreement, with full commitment by Iran and the United States to return to the original terms of agreement. The proposal was already raised (December 21, 2020) by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a meeting of foreign ministers of the member states of the deal, when he [presented a plan](#) to preserve and strengthen the JCPOA. The Chinese plan, which is likely coordinated with Tehran, calls for an end to the policy of maximum pressure on Iran pursued by the Trump administration; the United States' return to the original agreement as soon as possible; the unconditional lifting of the sanctions on Iran; Iran's return to its full commitment in the agreement; and a fair solution to the issue of Iranian compliance. Beyond convening an international conference with the participation of all member states, China proposed establishing a regional forum (concurrently or as a second phase) in the Persian Gulf, aimed at promoting multilateral dialogue to resolve regional security issues and aid in the preservation of the JCPOA. Russian Deputy

Foreign Minister Ryabkov told the media (February 15) that Russia had discussed the issue with the United States and China, and expressed public support for the Chinese proposal.

The Chinese statements invite the question whether China's plan to be more active in mediating between the countries involved in the Iranian nuclear issue is part of a broader goal to promote cooperation with the Biden administration on essential issues to the United States. Inter alia, China can partner with the United States in advancing the Paris Agreement on climate change, addressing the coronavirus crisis, and encouraging nuclear nonproliferation cooperation, particularly in the context of Iran and North Korea, in exchange for maintaining interests that are important to China. Overall, cooperation with Beijing, a permanent member of the Security Council, is necessary in order to find solutions to global problems. Thus, with the entry of the Biden administration into office, Beijing marks the crisis over the Iranian nuclear issue, and the perceived change that has taken place from the Trump administration to the Biden presidency, as an opportunity for cooperation with the United States.

On the eve of the conversation between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping (February 11), Robert Malley, the US Special Envoy for Iran and who was a partner in the negotiations that led to the 2015 agreement, had a telephone conversation with Ma Zhaoxu, currently the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister in charge of the issue and previously ambassador to the UN. Media reports of the conversation between the Presidents did not disclose how much they touched on the Iranian issue, [and the State Department declined to comment or reveal details](#) about the conversation between Malley and his Chinese counterpart. On the Chinese side, however, President Xi was quoted as saying to President Biden that "in this volatile international situation, China and the United States have a shared commitment and responsibility as permanent members of the Security Council."

Over the years, and with their strategic considerations, including the issue of the "one China" policy in the context of Taiwan, the Chinese have preferred to strengthen cooperation with the United States, including, if necessary, at the expense of relations with Iran. This was the case in the 1990s, when under pressure from the Clinton administration, the Chinese announced the cancellation of contracts for the sale of a nuclear reactor and a uranium conversion facility to Iran. This followed negotiations in the shadow of the military crisis with Taiwan in 1996, as part of Beijing's desire for the United States to stop selling advanced weapons to Taiwan and to tie these issues together. The same is true of the years of negotiations with Iran to advance an agreement on the nuclear issue. From 2006 to 2010, from the end of President George W. Bush's tenure and during the Obama presidency, China has supported six Security Council resolutions

against Iran and to Iran's displeasure, provided important backing to the United States, as part of China's understanding that its support for the United States serves broader national interests, and specifically core interests. China supported Security Council Resolution 1803 (March 3, 2008), which strengthened sanctions on Iranian companies and individuals, and banned countries from helping them cross their territory. Indonesia, then a member of the Security Council, abstained. China also voted in favor of Resolution 1929 (June 9, 2010) which banned cooperation with Iran and investments in nuclear and ballistic missiles. Two members of the Security Council at the time, Brazil and Turkey, voted against the decision and Lebanon abstained.

During the process leading up to the Security Council's six decisions against Iran and following the achievement of the nuclear deal in 2015, China tried to help Iran by softening the wording of those decisions, but in the end, supporting them, alongside Russia, helped the United States send a message of global consensus against Iran. Moreover, China supported resolutions against Iran that included political, economic, and personal sanctions – measures that China has opposed in principle since the time it itself suffered such sanctions, at least until its accession to the UN in 1971.

The main interests underlying Chinese conduct in the process of advancing the nuclear agreement with Iran and relations with the United States – interests that remain relevant today – include:

- a. Supporting a diplomatic solution through negotiations in order to prevent the use of force against Iran by the United States or Israel, which could lead to war and regional instability and harm China's political and economic interests (before the Beijing Olympics in the summer of 2008, China sent its deputy Foreign Minister to Israel with an urgent message, to ensure that Israel would not launch a military operation at a time that would hurt the Olympics).
- b. Promoting and preserving essential Chinese interests vis-à-vis the United States, including strengthening the "one China" policy on the subject of Taiwan.
- c. Strengthening China's position as relevant to the resolution of international crises and committed to assisting in diplomatic solutions to global conflicts as part of its role as a permanent member of the Security Council.
- d. Whenever possible, and while avoiding harm to Chinese companies due to US sanctions, promoting bilateral cooperation with Iran, especially economically. Inter alia, China is using Iran's need for Chinese aid to achieve long term economic gains through contracts to purchase energy at negotiated reduced prices.

Israel's concern that Iran may become a nuclear state does not figure on the list of China's essential interests. China, a nuclear state surrounded by other nuclear states, is not afraid of countries with nuclear weapons, which in its view are only deterrent

weapons. As during the six-party talks with North Korea, China has worked to maintain stability and prevent US military activity, but it has not prevented North Korea from advancing to the status of a nuclear state.

President Trump's unilateral decision in May 2018 to withdraw from the agreement was a major disappointment for the Chinese leadership under President Xi Jinping, who saw the JCPOA as a great success and proof that diplomatic negotiations can create solutions that strengthen regional security and stability, and as an example of cooperation on a major global issue between China and the United States.

Chinese success in assisting a return to the agreement will earn it diplomatic points vis-à-vis all parties, and moreover, in the Chinese view, will lead to calm and regional stability that are important for China's continued economic growth. In the foreseeable future, it will allow China to advance the 25-year strategic agreement with Iran, whose contents were leaked in 2020 by sources in Tehran, but so far has not been approved by the Chinese leadership and has not been signed. Beijing will approve the signing of the strategic agreement with Iran only if there is positive progress between the United States and Iran, and the agreement is not seen as a provocative move in the United States, the European Union, and other Gulf states, but as a complementary move to promote economic partnerships with Gulf states.

In the coming months China will likely be more active as a partner, mainly behind the scenes, in contacts between Iran and the United States, with the aim of promoting a full return of all parties to the original JCPOA, with minor changes that may make the return politically easier for the parties. In the Chinese view, Israel is perceived on this issue as part of the camp that continues to oppose an agreement with Iran, and China would not expect Israel to join or support such an initiative. Accordingly, China does not see a need to coordinate moves with Israel (unless it fears that Israel is close to using military force against Iran). In view of the possibility that in the coming months there will be an increase in China's involvement in the processes of promoting the United States' return to the nuclear deal, Israel should closely monitor China's diplomatic moves, coordinate its policies with the United States and Gulf states, and try to promote dialogue at the level of the Chinese leadership while strengthening direct contact with senior diplomats dealing with the Iranian issue.