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China and Iran: Resurging Defense Cooperation?

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Defense cooperation between China and Iran reportedly began in the early 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, when China became one of Iran's main arms suppliers and contributed to its nuclear program. Following the war, and since then, Chinese arms exports to Iran gradually declined, and in 1997 the assistance to Iran's nuclear program formally ceased. Although the current level of cooperation between China and Iran pales in comparison with that of the 1980s and 1990s, there have been significant advances under Xi Jinping, reflected primarily in visits, joint exercises, and possible covert attempts to assist Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Iran's commitment to the destruction of Israel and its pursuit of a nuclear program makes it the leading external threat to Israel; the proliferation of its missile and rocket arsenals among proxies throughout the region makes it the main military threat to Israel, but also to United States forces and its partners in the Middle East. Thus, the defense cooperation between China and Iran demands careful monitoring by Israel, and by the United States and its regional partners.

China-Iran defense cooperation reportedly began after Beijing dropped its support for revolutionary communism following the open-door policy of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in late 1970s. Iran's radical policies after the 1979 revolution isolated it from the rest of the world, including the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as much of the Arab world, a stance with which China could identify and use for its own interests.

This paper explores the nature and range of defense cooperation between China and Iran from the 1980s until recently. It follows three defense areas in which China and Iran cooperate: arms export; contribution to Iran's nuclear program; and joint military exercises. It then estimates the future for the Iran-China defense relationship and draws implications for Israel.

The figures regarding arms acquisitions and the costs of arms deals, all in United States dollars (USD), are from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database (SIPRI, 2021) and other publicly available sources, and represent the actual supply periods. Exports of light weapons (e.g., assault rifles, machine guns, and ammunition) are excluded, as are cyber weapons, which are difficult to track.

The paper concludes that China-Iran defense cooperation, although currently fairly limited, may be undergoing a potential resurgence, evident in the recent increase of joint drills, military visits, and a strategic agreement under discussion. China's defense cooperation with Iran is not as intimate as with Pakistan, China's largest military importer and closest partner, as Pakistan shares important strategic interests with China in the Indian Ocean and is a key link in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Arms Exports

Chinese arms sales to Iran reportedly began during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), when China exported large amounts of weapons to both sides of the conflict. The first arms supply to Iran was 107mm rockets in 1981, which were subsequently produced locally and designated as Fajr-1. Other items sold to Iran were aircraft, main battle tanks, and surface-to-air missile systems, most of which were Soviet equipment produced by license in China. The arms were often provided indirectly and discreetly through North Korea, and were recognized by Iran as a critical form of support from China (Harold & Nader, 2012). Almost two billion USD worth of Chinese weapons were sold to Iran during the war; at the same time, Iraq enjoyed more than double this amount.

After the war, Iranian interest in Chinese arms focused mainly on anti-ship missiles. Iran acquired knowledge and production infrastructure from China, in the form of a negligible number of arms for reverse engineering toward self-production. Thus, over time Iranian industries produced Iranian versions of Chinese weapons. Between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s Iran produced hundreds of Noor and Tondar anti-ship missiles based on the Chinese missiles C-802 and C-801, respectively, as well as C-701-based Kowsar missiles, and Chinese C-704-based Nasr-1 anti-ship missiles (Brandon, 2013). In March 2010, Iran opened a Chinese-built plant for Nasr-1 (China opens missile plant, 2010). Furthermore, by supplying Iran with such weapons, China likely gained an opportunity to test further technologies and concepts of operations that it itself might one day use in a conflict with Taiwan or even the US.

Beside anti-ship technologies, China reportedly provided Iran with 150 Type-86 armored personal carriers, designated locally as Boraq, and over a thousand QW-11 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), designated as Misagh, and six FM-80 surface to air missile (SAM) systems, which were probably produced in Iran under the designation of Shahab Thaqeb. At least three air search radars were also provided.

Some of the Iranian-developed missiles based on Chinese technologies were sent by Iran to Hezbollah and Gaza militant terror groups and used against Israel. For example, in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Israeli Navy Sa'ar 5 corvette Hanit was hit by what was apparently an Iranian version of the Chinese C-802, which was fired from the Beirut coast; Hezbollah also fired 122mm Chinese Type-81 cluster rockets at civilian targets in northern Israel, possibly provided by Iran (Human Rights Watch, 2006). In 2011, Israel Defense Forces seized the weapons ship *Victoria* on its way from Syria to Gaza, with six Iranian missiles aboard based on the C-704 (IDF Spokesperson, 2011). In October

2016, Yemeni Houthi rebels claimed they successfully fired anti-ship missiles at an Emirati military vessel in the Bab el Mandeb Strait that was approaching the Yemeni port of Mocha. Missiles were reportedly either the Chinese-made C-802 supplied by Iran or the locally made Noor (Missile attack destroys ex-navy ship, 2016). The same month, a US Navy-guided missile destroyer was targeted in a failed missile attack from territory in Yemen controlled by Iran-aligned Houthi rebels. The two missiles shot at the American Destroyer were reportedly of the same type (LaGrone, 2016).

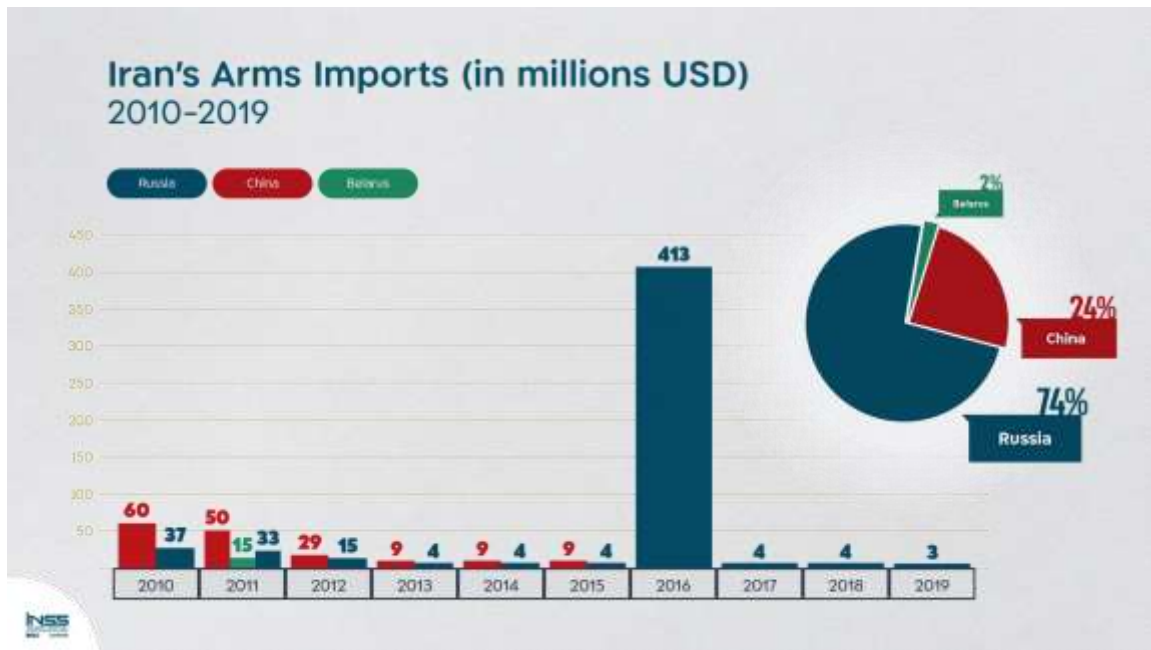


Figure 1: Arms exports to Iran in millions USD, 2010-2019 | Source: SIPRI 2021

China after Russia

Between 2010 and 2019, China's arms exports to Iran amounted to 166 million USD, or 19 percent of its arms exports to the Middle East, and a mere 1 percent of its global arms exports total. In comparison, Russia's arms exports to Iran amounted to 521 million USD, or 5.6 percent of Russia's arms exports to the Middle East, and 0.7 percent of its total global arms export. In those years, Russia was also Iran's largest arms supplier, with 74 percent of Iran's total arms imports, while China and Belarus accounted for 24 percent and 2 percent, respectively.

While Chinese arms exports to Iran ceased after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached in 2015, Russia, on the other hand, continued to supply weapons to Iran. These arms deals were signed with Iran beforehand, and included anti-tank systems, air search radars, and four S-300PMU-2 SAM systems. The latter was originally purchased in 2007, but was blocked until April 2015 when the Russia lifted its self-imposed ban on the sale due to progress in the nuclear talks, and was finally supplied in 2016 (Taleblu, 2016). Belarus had a single 15 million USD deal in 2011, selling Iran two Vostok-E air search radars.

Exports to Gulf States

Chinese arms exports to Iran occurred in parallel with sales to the Gulf states, which are US security partners that maintain strong economic and energy relations with China. China's arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates between 2010 and 2019 amounted to 18 percent (165 million USD) and 17 percent (155 million USD) of its total arms exports to the Middle East, respectively. Furthermore, China has accounted for merely 0.67 percent of Saudi Arabia's total arms imports and 1.4 percent of UAE's total arms imports, respectively.

While Chinese arms exports to Iran during this period primarily involved anti-ship missiles, Saudi Arabia and the UAE purchased mainly various unmanned combat air vehicles systems (UCAV), which they could not obtain from the US at the time (Herb, 2017). Recent reports stated that the US plans to sell 18 MQ-9B UCAVs to the UAE – a breakthrough that was made possible as part of the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 (Mezher, 2020). If approved, it may suggest that the Gulf states, which prefer Western technology but felt compelled to turn to China due to American restrictions, will limit or abandon the option to continue importing Chinese UCAVs for their fleets in the future.

Contribution to Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programs

Aside from weapons, China is said to have assisted Iran in developing its civilian nuclear program between the early 1980s and 1997 (Harold and Nader, 2012). China reportedly helped Iran build the Isfahan Nuclear Research Center, which opened in 1984, suggesting the cooperation started a few years earlier. China also trained Iranian nuclear engineers and helped Iran mine uranium. The two countries signed a nuclear cooperation agreement in 1990, and in 1991 China shipped one metric ton of uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) to Iran (Scobell & Nader, 2016, p.56). Between 1998 and 2002, Iran used the Chinese UF₆ in its testing of centrifuges at the Kalaye Electric Company in Tehran (Director General, 2003). Following the 1997 Taiwan crisis, Beijing realized that Chinese assistance to Iran further aggravated China's relationship with the US and put China's continued rapid economic growth at risk. China then decided to limit its relations with Iran and ceased cooperation with Iran's nuclear program (Garver, 2007, pp. 13-17).

Since the establishment of the Iranian Space Agency in 2003, Iran has used its space program as a platform to expand and improve its ballistic missile program, and launched several space rockets based on domestically-built ballistic missiles such as the Shahab-3 (Smith, 2020). Since 2005, Iran has also gained assistance with its space program through membership in the Asia Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), which aims to promote peaceful uses of outer space. In 2016 it was reported that APSCO members China, Pakistan, Iran, and Peru were in the process of creating a space situational awareness (SSA) network initially consisting of ground-based optical telescopes (Space Watch Global, 2016). In October 2015, Iranian electronics company Salran signed an agreement with Chinese firms to start using BeiDou 2 satellite positioning, navigation, and timing equipment for defense purposes, which ultimately

could improve Iran's use of satellite navigation in its ballistic missile program (Nadimi, 2016).

Furthermore, Chinese front businesses remain important in Iran's proliferation and defense modernization programs. In April 2014, the US Treasury Department sanctioned eight China-based companies for acting as fronts in support of Iran's missile proliferation activities (Iran Primer, 2014). According to a Treasury report published in July 2017, Iran received electronic components for its nuclear program through China-based procurement agent Emily Liu and four associated entities, as early as 2014 (US Department of Treasury, 2017). In November 2020 the US State Department imposed more sanctions against two Chinese companies – Chengdu Best New Materials Co., Ltd. and Zibo Elim Trade Co., Ltd. – for undisclosed support of Iran's missile program (Pompeo, 2020). It is unclear whether the Chinese government is behind these activities, or is aware of them and decided to turn a blind eye to them.

Visits and Joint Exercises

After Xi Jinping was elected in November 2012 as general secretary of the Communist Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission, he launched a massive overhaul of the Chinese military, accelerating its shift from a traditionally land-based territorial defense force to a force projecting power (Lague & Kang, 2019). According to China's Defense White Paper released in May 2015 and the first of which to be fully implementing Xi's vision under his term, China was called for the first time "to safeguard the security of China's overseas interests" and in particular, "to safeguard its maritime rights and interests" (State Council, 2015).

China has routinely carried out overseas port visits since 1985, and until 2006 it conducted **60** port visits, most of which were in the Asia-Pacific region, with only two in the Middle East (Egypt and Turkey in 2002) (Yung & Rustici, 2011). China has expanded its naval diplomacy overseas as part of the "new historic missions" articulated in 2004 by the former President of China Hu Jintao, requiring the Chinese military to be prepared to safeguard China's expanding national interests overseas, including anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 (Hartnett, 2009).

In March 2013, Iranian vessels had their first port visit to China, docking at Zhangjiagang in Jiangsu (Murphy, 2014). In May 2014 Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan visited Beijing and was welcomed by his Chinese counterpart, Chang Wanquan. Dehghan called for the renewal of the ancient bond symbolized by the BRI. He also asked for Iran and China to increase their cooperation in defense, security, and military matters (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

In September 2014, Chinese warships visited Iran for the first time to conduct joint naval exercises. The exercise involved two Chinese vessels, the Type-054A guided missile frigate Changzhou and the Type-052C destroyer Changchun, which were returning to China after concluding their anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Erdbrink &

Buckley, 2014). In October 2014 Iranian Navy Commander Commodore Habibollah Sayyari visited China, the first such visit to China by someone in his position. Sayyari met with high-ranking Chinese officers, including the North Sea Fleet commander and the deputy commander of the since-disbanded Jinan Military Region; he also paid visits to several facilities including the Chinese Naval Submarine Academy. Sayyari remarked during his visit that Iran sought greater cooperation with China in the areas of anti-piracy, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief operations, as well as in the area of protecting sea lines of communication (Qiu & Wang, 2014).

On November 14, 2016, Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan paid a three-day visit to Tehran and met with the Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan. Chang expressed confidence that Iran-China defense ties will be strengthened in the years ahead. The two signed an agreement pledging closer military cooperation in a number of areas, including military training and counter-terrorism operations (Gady, 2016). In June 2017 Iran and China launched a joint naval exercise in the Gulf. The four-day exercise involved two Chinese vessels, the Type-054A guided-missile frigate Jingzhou and the Changchun. Reportedly, an Iranian destroyer and some 700 navy personnel participated in the exercise (Reuters, 2017). In December 2017, Iranian Armed Forces Deputy Chief of Staff for International Affairs Qadir Nezami traveled to Beijing and met Major General Shao Yuanming, the Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission. Chinese media reported the two sides discussed international and regional issues of mutual concern and China-Iran military cooperation (Tang, 2017). Iranian media added that the meeting was the first “joint military commission of Iran and China” and was at the invitation of China's Defense Minister (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2017).

In September 2018 Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe and Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission General Zhang Youxia met with Defense Minister of Iran Brigadier General Amir Hatami in Beijing. The Iranian side said it was willing to work with China to “fully implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, strengthen pragmatic cooperation in various fields, and promote the continuous development of relations between the two countries and the two militaries” (Chen, 2018). In September 2019 the Iranian Armed Forces commander, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, arrived in China for a three-day visit. Iranian media reported that the visit was at the invitation of the Chinese Defense Minister. Bagheri visited the Chinese naval base in Shanghai, inspected naval equipment and vessels stationed at the base, and later said that Iran and China “will witness significant development in their defense and military relations.” The two sides also discussed ways to organize an Iran-China joint technical and industrial commission (Iran Press, 2019).

In December 2019 Shao visited Iran and met with Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi to organize joint trilateral naval drills between Iran, China, and Russia. Iranian media reported that Shao invited Khanzadi to visit China, and noted Iran and China's interactions to “maintain regional security and world peace” (Islamic

Republic News Agency, 2019). Later that month, China, Russia, and Iran launched their four-day joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. Iranian Second Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani said the joint drills also signal to the world that relations between Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing have reached a "meaningful" level (Westcott & Alkshali, 2019). China's Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Wu Qian said, "The joint exercise is a normal military exchange arrangement of the three countries...in line with related international laws and practices (Huaxia, 2019), and that China sent one vessel – the Type-052D destroyer Xining, which was a part of China's routine anti-piracy task forces in the region.

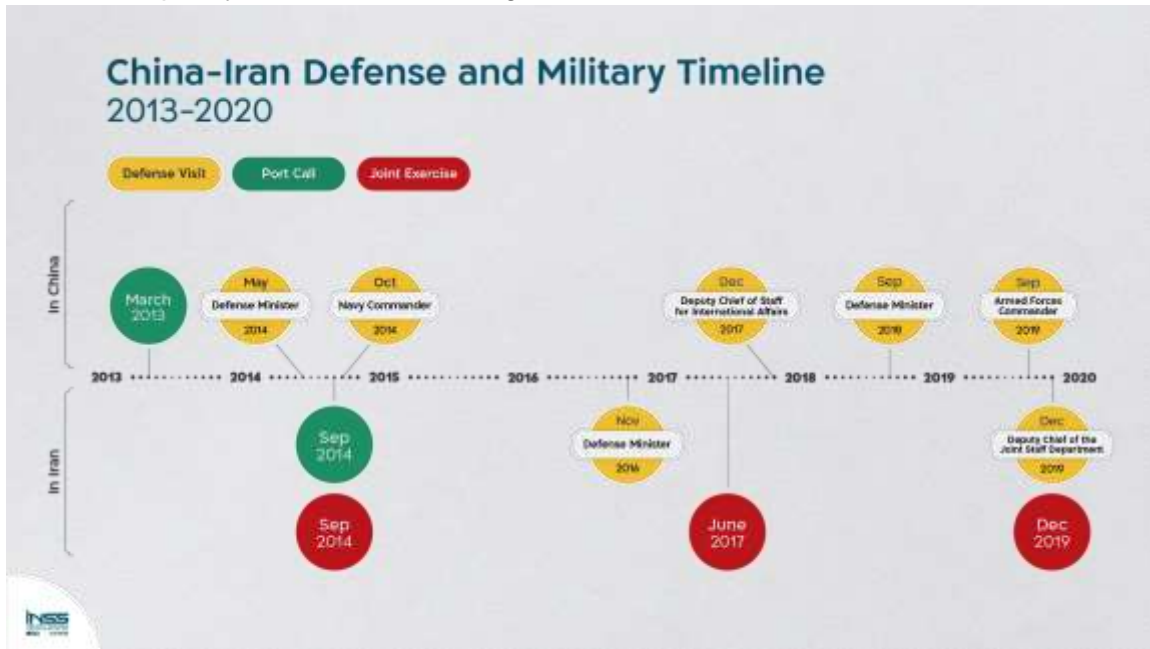


Figure 2: China-Iran defense and military timeline 2013-2020

Of seven senior military visits held between the two countries, only two were in Iran, as China prefers to act as the patron towards its partners, causing Iranian officials to make their way to China and not the reverse. Similarly, none of the three joint naval exercises so far between China and Iran were in China. Furthermore, Chinese vessels participating in the joint naval exercises with Iran did not arrive in Iran from China especially for that purpose, but rather were sent from forces already stationed in the area, as part of its anti-piracy task force. The joint exercises reflect an asymmetry in capabilities and interests: China has an interest in showing a presence in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf region. On the other hand, Iran has less interest in the Asia Pacific region and its military capability to reach this region is limited.

China's defense cooperation with Iran is not significantly different from its ties with other partners in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia. Reportedly, China has helped the Saudis with their own nuclear efforts by helping it covertly establish a yellowcake extraction facility, and providing its ballistic missile capabilities (Strobel, Gordon, Schwartz, 2020). In contrast to the three joint drills China conducted with Iran in the past decade, it has

reportedly held two joint drills with Saudi Arabia and none with the UAE. Furthermore, China has reportedly not conducted senior military visits to either Saudi Arabia or UAE, and vice versa. The only exception was the participation of the Royal Saudi Air Force aerobatic team Saudi Hawks in China for the Zhuhai Air Show in November 2018 (ZX, 2018). In October 2016, China held its first anti-terror drills with Saudi Arabia in Chongqing (Reuters, 2016), and in November 2019 the two countries launched the Blue Sword 2019 joint training exercise between their naval special forces in Jeddah (Yang, 2019).

In addition to visits and joint exercises, In March 2020 the Chinese military provided the Iranian armed forces an undisclosed number of medical supplies, such as nucleic acid testing kits, protective clothing, and disposable surgical masks, to help Iran fight the COVID-19 pandemic (Huaxia, 2020). This was part of larger effort of Beijing and the Chinese military to support partners during the first global outbreak of the disease. Medical equipment was donated to some 150 countries and four international organizations (Segev & Lavi, 2020). The global pandemic has allowed China to send a message to its partners that its military too can help them in times of trouble.

Future Implications and Significance for Israel

Xi Jinping's era marks a new chapter in China-Iran defense cooperation, indicated publicly by senior visits, naval port calls, and joint exercises. At the same time, reports from the US Treasury suggest Chinese companies are covertly assisting Iran's missiles program. This growing relationship, while China halted its arms exports to Iran after the JCPOA, may indicate an expanding defense and military dimension in the China-Iran Strategic Comprehensive Partnership, whose focus is still on economic and energy ties.

On March 27, 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year strategic agreement. Although its content was not officially published, an 18-page document draft in Farsi was reported by the *New York Times* in July 2020, probably leaked by sources in Iran, to the dismay of China. Among the several topics discussed in the published draft, are Chinese and Iranian cooperation in cyberspace, the Chinese Global Positioning System BeiDou, and construction of Iran's 5G infrastructures. The draft also mentions the possibility of joint military training and exercises, as well as the formation of a joint research and weapons development and intelligence sharing (Fassihi, 2020).

While it is too early to analyze the implications of the ostensible strategic agreement, their indications of future cooperation vectors should not be dismissed, as they emphasize a potential for joint research and development efforts in military technology and intelligence cooperation. The strategic agreement comes at a critical time when the embargo on Iran under Security Council Resolution 2231 is no longer in effect, renewing Iran's option to acquire Chinese weapons.

While China is engaged in parallel relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, over the years it has significantly helped strengthen Iran's offensive capabilities threatening

those partners, including through Iran's nuclear program. Israel should look closely at the developing relations between the two countries and identify potential weapons and technologies that are likely to be exported to Iran in the future. Understanding the nature and scope of Chinese-Iranian cooperation is important to crafting a successful Israeli strategy toward Iran and informing its policy towards China. All these issues warrant increased need from Israel to communicate with the Chinese government about the Iranian threats. Israel should raise these topics with the US administration and invest intelligence efforts to understand this emerging cooperation in which military technology and knowledge from China enhance the Iranian threat to Israel.

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