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TÍTULO: El papel de los intereses comunes en la promoción de la Cooperación China-Irán en el Medio Oriente después de la Primavera Árabe.

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RESUMEN: Con el inicio de la “Primavera Árabe” en diciembre del 2010, se produjeron cambios en el Medio Oriente, que incluyen la aparición de nuevos actores en el Medio Oriente, potencias como Rusia y China. Como sabemos, antes de la primavera árabe, se puede decir que el Medio Oriente es la esfera de influencia de los Estados Unidos. Dentro de la región, la influencia de Irán ha aumentado. Este artículo analiza las razones del rápido desarrollo de las relaciones China-Irán al enumerar los intereses comunes de ambas naciones. Los autores creen que aunque China e Irán están fortaleciendo la cooperación en varios campos, todavía existen muchas dificultades para lograr un mayor desarrollo de su relación con el nivel estratégico.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Oriente Medio, la primavera Árabe, intereses comunes, Irán, China.

TITLE: Role of Common Interests in Promoting China-Iran Cooperation in the Middle East after the Arab Spring.

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ABSTRACT: With the beginning of the “Arab Spring” in December 2010, many changes occurred in the Middle East. These changes include the emergence of new players in the Middle East, some of the strongest powers – Russia and China. As we know, before the Arab Spring, the Middle East can be said to be the USA’s sphere of influence. Within the region, Iran’s influence has increased several times. This article will analyze the reasons for the rapid development of China-Iran relations by enumerating the common interests of China and Iran. The authors believe that although China and Iran are strengthening cooperation in various fields, there are still many difficulties in achieving further development of their relationship to the strategic level.

KEY WORDS: Middle East, Arab Spring, common interests, Iran, China.

INTRODUCTION.

The Middle East is a significant strategic region in global politics and is one of the most influential sub-regions of the international regime and its political processes. It's due to the geopolitical importance of this region, which has made it a vital area for the interests of the major powers and their global roles. Moreover, it's considered one of the wealthiest regions in which the energy sources (oil and gas) located, where it contains two-thirds of the world's oil reserves.

Coupled with the contradictions and interest competition among the countries in the Middle East, conflicts have almost never stopped. Although actions of Arab Spring protesters were considered an expression of the political trend of democratization, with the exception of Tunisia, the Arab “wave of democratization” could not rise due to the weakness of modern political institutions (parliaments,

parties, elections), resulting in not being able to maintain stability where the Arab Spring occurred¹. In the chaos, the Arab Spring has exacerbated the turmoil in the Middle East and changed the balance of power once. The rapid increase in relations between Iran and China is also a major change in the Middle East. The common interests of the two nations have undoubtedly played a key role.

DEVELOPMENT.

Transformations and changes in the Middle East after the Arab Spring.

Since decades, the region is beset of conflicts, wars, tensions, and political problems, which puts it in a relatively unstable political and security environment. It is the competition of global powers outside the region – the United States, Russia and China – that plays an influential role in ensuring the preservation of their interests², which was accompanied by a competition for leadership of the region among a number of Middle Eastern countries, notably Iran, Turkey and Egypt before the Arab Spring. At that period many issues such as the Palestinian issue, nuclear weapons, and terrorism had led to international and regional alliances.

The Arab Spring and the revolutions that swept the countries of this region by the end of 2010 posed significant political, security, and economic challenges that affected the interests of global and regional powers. “In the presence of common points, each country subsequently began a political movement in accordance with its own logic”³. Since then, this region has witnessed increasing political and security instability: the emergence of failed countries, civil wars as hard as Syria and Yemen, unstable countries like Egypt.

¹ Кудряшова, И.В. Арабское государство до и после «арабской весны» // Перспективы, 26 Октября, 2015, (In Russian: Kudryashova, I.V. Arab state before and after the “Arab spring” // Perspektivy, October 26, 2015) URL: http://www.perspektivy.info/rus/desk/arabskoje_gosudarstvo_do_i_posle_arabskoj_vesny_chast_2_2015-10-26.htm Visited on December 20, 2015.

² شفيق المصري ، أمن النفط ، أمن المنطقة : أكبر مصدر قلق في المنطقة ، أكتوبر 2013 ، ص 22 (In Arabic: Shafiq al-Masri, Oil security: The Biggest Concern in the Region // Journal of Economy and Business, May 22, 2013, p. 22.)

³ Сапронова, М.А. Арабский Восток: итоги политической трансформации // МГИМО, 5 января, 2015, (In Russian: Sapronova, M.A. Arab East: Results of Political Transformation // MGIMO, January 5, 2015) URL: <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/263651/> Visited on February 12, 2018.

A change in the nature and roles of the regional players has been seen: the decline of the regional role of Egypt⁴, the rise of Saudi Arabia (especially with the arrival of King Salman and his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to power in 2015) and Turkey's abandonment of the "zero problems" strategy with neighbors and its interference in various problems of this region, especially the Syrian crisis⁵. In addition to this, Iran has played more roles in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

With the help of Iran, movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Ansar Allah (the Houthi movement) in Yemen are able to expand their influence. At the same time, Russia and China have expanded their role in this region.

Another significant shift in the Middle East is the proliferation of terrorist movements, especially in Iraq and Syria. These organizations came with ideas of extremism and sought to establish political entities; for example, "ISIS" has adopted a Media strategy to attract new members from different countries, such as targeting Islamic minorities such as Uighurs in China.

These transformations and changes in the Middle East have directly affected the nature of relations between states (global and regional powers) and the structure of alliances in the Middle East.

In this process, the relationship between Iran and China has also changed because of the increase in common interests.

رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة 2011-2013 دراسة حالة ليبيا الدولية الفاشلة وقضية التدخل الإنساني في المنطقة العربية ادق لجال 4
 (In Arabic: Sadiq Al-Haj'jal, Failed States and the Issue of Humanitarian Intervention in the Arab Region, Libya Case Study, 2011-2013, Unpublished Master Thesis, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, University of Algiers, 2014, p. 72.)
 5 شيماء أبو عامر ، بيرلين ، المركز الديمقراطي العربي ، التحولات الإقليمية في الشرق الأوسط وأثرها على القوة الإقليمية لإيران ، شيماء أبو عامر 2018، P249. (In Arabic: Shaimaa Aboamer, The Regional Transformations in The Middle East, The impact on the Regional power of Iran, Arab Democratic Center, Perlin, 2018, p. 249.)

Review of China-Iran relations before the Arab Spring.

China and Iran established diplomatic relations in 1971⁶. In 1979 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, China's interaction with the Islamic government of Iran has been 40 years. Looking back at history, in general, the relationship between China and Iran can be divided into four periods:

The first period: Returning to normal.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's relations with non-Islamic China were once alienated. Exactly, in November and December 1978, China convened the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. One of the results was that China abandoned its diplomacy with political ideology and began independent foreign policy of peace. China's insistence on neutrality and sale of weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war shows that Beijing is a capable and trustworthy collaborator⁷.

The second period: Rapid development.

In 1989, Ayatollah Khamenei's official visit to China became a turning point in the relationship between China and Iran. In the 1990s, high-level exchanges of visits between the two nations were frequent, and they "transcended ideology in favor of pragmatism"⁸. China's active participation in Iran's post-war reconstruction had led to exchanges and cooperation in many fields between the two nations.

⁶ In 1920, China and Iran signed the "China-Persia Treaty of Friendship" in Rome, but at the time both countries were busy with internal affairs and had no intention of developing bilateral relations. In 1942, China and Iran, which were simultaneously assisted by the United States, also established diplomatic relations, but the China's Nationalist Party Government were busy in the civil war, nor has it developed relations with Iran. In fact, at that time, the two nations' diplomacy was not completely autonomous, the established diplomatic relations can be seen as a symbolic act of the US allies.

⁷ Garver, John W. *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in A Post-imperial World*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006, p. 60.

⁸ Dillon, Michael. "The Middle East and China," in Anoushiravan Ehteshami & Hannah Carter (Eds.) *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*. -London: Continuum Publishers, 2004, p. 50.

The third period: Platform time with slow development.

In 1996, because of the Taiwan issue, China has a tense relationship with the United States. At this background China postponed and cancelled the sale of nuclear reactors to Iran⁹. China-Iran relations were stagnant. At that time, political motives were more than economic considerations, and oil trading was only a by-product of bilateral relations.

The fourth period: closer relations based on economic and trade.

Some facts reduced their concerns of the US when China and Iran cooperated, for example in 1999, the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia was bombed, and in 2001, China joined the WTO.

Since Khatami's visit to China in 2000, China's political ties with Iran had become closer. After the emergence of the Iranian nuclear issue in 2003, although the development of China-Iran relations has become difficult due to the United States, the two nations have been actively increasing economic and energy cooperation on a large scale.

Common Interests of Iran and China in the Middle East.

After the Arab Spring, Iran has particularly become a major player in the areas of geopolitics and security, especially with regard to the Syrian Army and confrontation with ISIS that has emerged in Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Although it seems that China's military presence is not strong, with the implement of China's "One Belt and One Road" initiative and changes in the domestic security situation, especially the Uighurs' problems, the Middle East is becoming more and more important to China.

⁹ Bates, Gill. Chinese Arms Exports to Iran // Middle East Review of International Affairs Vol. 2, No. 2, May, 1998, pp. 355-379.

Political interests.

For Iran, the most important international strategy is to counter the US hegemony, strengthening its position in the Middle East and uniting all Shiite Muslims. The most urgent task of this country, which undergoes 40-year sanctions, is its constant need for international support in the UN Security Council to ease international pressure against Iran. After turning for the better to the Iranian nuclear issue in 2010, the number of contacts and mutual visits between the two countries increased significantly¹⁰.

After the Arab Spring, the consultations between China and Iran have focused on not only the Iranian nuclear issue, but also the Syrian situation, the regional situation, counter terrorism, economic cooperation, political party exchanges, cultural or academic exchanges and local government exchanges.

China supports the position of Iran in various international forums, preventing the UN Security Council from imposing too tough sanctions against Iran. Even in the Security Council, Chinese vetoes on the Syrian and the Yemeni issue is also support for Iran's position and interests. In the future, Iran may also need China's support in offsetting the impact of the US project of a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), whose current effect is still unknown.

¹⁰ Affected by the Iranian nuclear issue, US-Iran relations and international sanctions, from 2003 to 2010, the development of relations between China and Iran was hampered by international issues, the visits of very few times between China and Iran was limited to foreign ministry officials and civil academic or cultural exchanges. After the Arab Spring, with the changes in the regional situation, China and Iran exchanged visits very frequently, including various government departments, various special envoys and non-government delegations. Among them, high-level visits have increased significantly. In 2016, Xi Jinping visited Tehran, before which the last time the Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Iran was on April 19, 2002. Detailed information can be found on the website of Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran. URL: <http://www.ir.chineseembassy.org/chn/zygx/1/zzgx/> May 10, 2019.

“China’s support for Iran and Iranian positions has thus far been manifested in assistance with nuclear development and repercussions of the sanctions regime, as well as defense exports and the mutual aspiration to weaken the United States in the global system”¹¹.

For China, Iran’s diplomatic independence is one of the few important strategic forces that China can rely on¹². After Donald Trump took office, based on the US’s Asia-Pacific strategy, he accepted the Japanese plan and imposed a more comprehensive blockade on China. With the escalation of the US trade war, the US and China have launched a comprehensive conflict in the fields of economy, science and technology, public opinion and so on. Iran as one of the largest countries in the Middle East, China needs Iran’s influence in the Middle East to reach a balance with America, to pressure and even block the Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as to strengthen its positions among world powers.

Economic interests.

China is the largest crude oil importer in the world. For China, energy is not only related to economic interests, but also to national security at a strategic level. Under severe sanctions, oil exports have become Iran’s main source of revenue.

Iran holds some of the world’s largest deposits of proved oil and natural gas reserves, ranking as the world’s fourth-largest and second-largest reserve holder of oil and natural gas, respectively¹³. Oil-rich Iran is one of the main sources of oil for China. China is currently the largest importer of Iranian

¹¹ Raz Zimmt, Israel Kanner, OfekIsh Maas, And Tal Avidan. *China-Iran Relations following the Nuclear Agreement and the Lifted Sanctions: Partnership Inc. // Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July 2017, pp. 53-54. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, URL: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/adkan20-Zimmt.pdf> May 10, 2019.

¹² 田文林: 《伊朗对外行为的战略文化分析》, 载《阿拉伯世界研究》, 2016年第4期, 第86页。(In Chinese: Tian, Wen-lin. *Analysis of Strategic Culture of Iran's Foreign Behavior // Arab World Studies*, 2016, No. 4, p. 86.)

¹³ Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iran // U.S. Energy Information Administration. January 7, 2019. URL: https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis_includes/countries_long/Iran/pdf/iran_exe.pdf Visited on April 24, 2019.

oil, accounting for a quarter of Iran's oil exports. In 2018, the total volume of China's imported crude oil reached 402 million tons, increasing 9.0% year-on-year¹⁴.

Moreover, the Middle East is a key ring in China's main economic initiative "One Belt and One Road", which was announced in 2013. Because of its geographical position, Iran is an important part of this Chinese initiative. Iran also hopes to play a role as a bridge and link in the interconnection of Eurasia¹⁵. China-Iran's economic cooperation is expanding in scale. From January 22 to 23, 2016, during a state visit to Iran, China's President Xi Jinping and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani published in Tehran the "Joint Statement between P.R. China and I.R. Iran on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership". Under this framework, more MOU and Cooperation Agreements signed between Iran and China, mainly there are:

- "Memorandum of Understanding on Jointly Promoting the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road".
- "MoU for Expansion of Industrial, Mineral and Investment Cooperation".
- "Memorandum of Understanding on Strengthening Investment and Financing Cooperation".
- "Cooperation Agreement on Animal Health and Quarantine" and so on¹⁶.

The two nations set a goal of achieving bilateral trade volume of 600 billion U.S. dollars by 2026 and agreed to conduct necessary communication and consultation on the comprehensive cooperation agreement for the next 25 years¹⁷.

¹⁴ 亿海蓝数据：2018年中国进口原油到港量突破4亿大关 (In Chinese: Elane data: China's import of crude oil exceeded 400 million tons in 2018). January 8, 2019, URL: <http://www.elane.com/news/detail?d=0eca57ae-f5d7-4311-b634-6f68cbb78b0b> Visited on April 28, 2019.

¹⁵ Shuaib Bahman (شعیب بهمن), Israel's request for membership in the Eurasian Economic Union will not prevent Iran, in Persian, (درخواست اسرائیل برای عضویت در اتحادیه اقتصادی اوراسیا مانع ایران نمی شود), February 27, 2019, URL: <https://www.ir.sputniknews.com/opinion/201902274487858-اوراسیا-ایران-اتحادیه/> Visited on May 15, 2019.

¹⁶ All memorandums of understanding and agreements signed by China and Iran, as well as cooperation projects, can refer to the website of the Ministry of Commerce of China. Visited May 10, 2019. URL: <http://history.mofcom.gov.cn/?bandr=vlvzgdjmgx>

¹⁷ 陆瑾，中东与“一带一路”建设，载《阿拉伯世界研究》，2016年第6期。(In Chinese: Lu, Jin. The Middle East and the construction of the "Belt and Road" // Arab World Study, 2016, No. 6.)

For China, Iran has not only a large market, but also a labor advantage: Iranian youth are the majority and highly educated. The convergence of economic interests between China and Iran has been increasing, laying the foundation for the joint construction of the “Belt and Road”.

Table 1. Major products of China-Iran trade

China’s imports from Iran	Iran’s imports from China
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crude oil (which accounts for more than half of China’s imports from Iran). • Petrochemical products. • Mineral products. • Foodstuffs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Machinery and equipment. • Electronic products. • Petrochemicals. • Steel and building materials. • Light industry products.

For Iran, after the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, in order to achieve the economic growth rate of 8% and the goal of becoming the first region's power in economy, science and technology in 2025, Iran regards economic construction as the primary task of current domestic construction¹⁸. Thanks to the policies of “resistance economy”, Iran’s industrial base is good, but now it is necessary to upgrade the level of industrialization.

China has a capital advantage, and its equipment and production capacity are of high quality and low price. Through the Export-Import Bank of China (China Exim Bank) and China Development Bank, China has provided a large number of financing loans for cooperation projects with Iran¹⁹.

¹⁸ Ibid.

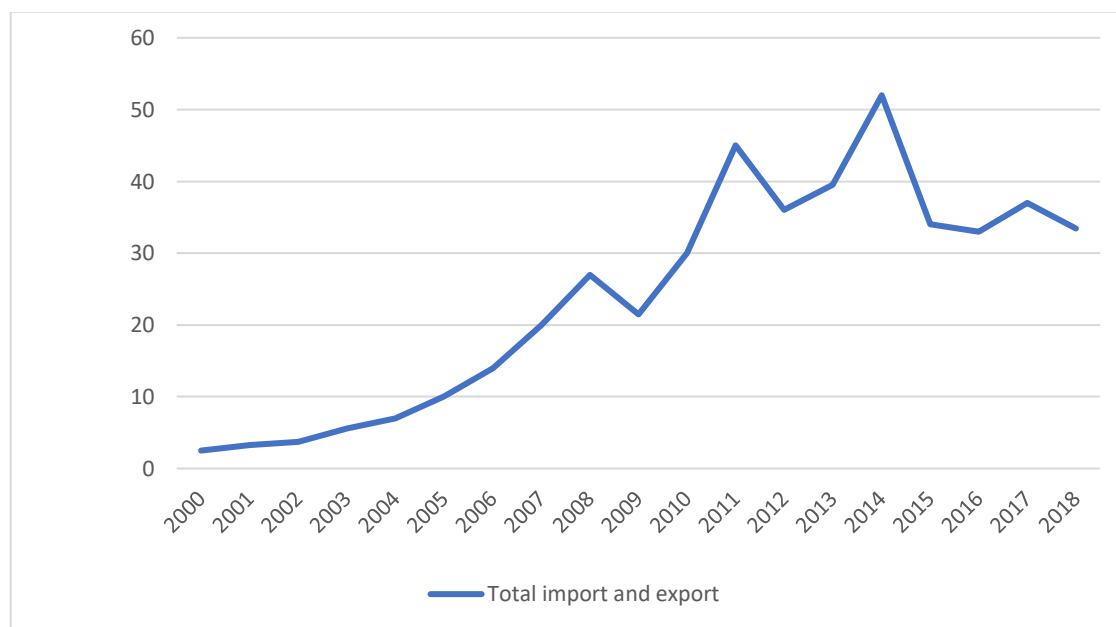
¹⁹ For example, in 2017 in Beijing China’s CITIC investment group and a delegation of Iranian banks led by central bank president Valiollah Seif signed a contract that this Chinese investment firm would provide a \$10 billion credit line for Iranian banks. Detailed information can be found on the website:

اعطای-اعتبار-ده-میلیارد-https://www.dw.com/fa-ir-بانک-ایرانی، دویچه وله، 17 سپتامبر 2017، ۵ اعطای-اعتبار-ده-میلیارد-دلاری-بانک-چینی-به-۵-بانک-ایرانی/40545396

(In Persian: China provides \$10 billion credit line to Iran. September 16, 2017), visited on May 10, 2019. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/china-provides-10-billion-credit-line-to-iran/>

Iran's huge population is both consumers and a labor force for China; in addition to oil, Iran has many types of mineral resources and large reserves. China's capital and technology complement Iran's resources.

Chart 1. 2000-2018 China-Iran Total Import and Export (\$ billion)²⁰



Security interests and military interests.

After the Arab Spring, the common security interests of Iran and China have increased, especially in connection with the problem of terrorism and terrorist groups that are based in Syria and Iraq and include hundreds of Chinese Uighurs. As early as 2016, Rouhani had discussed with his Chinese counterpart the issue of cooperation in fighting terrorism and the provision of mutual aid to countries that are targeted by terrorism, including Syria and Yemen²¹. Iran, which directly fights these groups

²⁰ Among them, the statistics in 2003 are from January to October of the year, and the statistics in 2018 are from January to November. Detailed information can be found on the website of Department of Asian Affairs of Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, URL: <http://www.yzs.mofcom.gov.cn> and the website of Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Iran, URL: <http://www.ir.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/201902/20190202836315.shtml> March 21, 2019.

²¹ Raz Zimmt, Israel Kanner, OfekIsh Maas, And Tal Avidan. China-Iran Relations following the Nuclear Agreement and the Lifted Sanctions: Partnership Inc. // Strategic Assessment, Vol. 20, No. 2, July 2017, pp. 53-54. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, URL: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/adkan20-Zimmt.pdf> April 24, 2019.

in Iraq and Syria, and China signed a number of agreements on the extradition of criminals and terrorists. Since Chinese Muslims are almost all Sunni, only Tajiks of China and very few Uighurs are Shiites. China will not worry about Iran supporting the Uighurs with a radical ideology, like Saudi Arabia and Turkey are doing. Moreover, the two nations have not been worried that their cooperation will be affected by ideology.

Table 2. China-Iran Agreements²²

Agreements	Date	In force or not	
		In China	In Iran
Agreement on extradition of criminals between China and Iran.	9/10/2012	Approval 1/14/2017	Approval (March 2014 – March 2015)
Judicial assistance agreement on criminal matters between China and Iran.	1/23/2016	Not yet in force	Formulation of a bill and follow-up for approval
Judicial assistance agreement with China on civil and trade matters between China and Iran.	1/23/2016	Not yet in force	Formulation of a bill and follow-up for approval
Agreement on transfer of sentenced persons between China and Iran.	9/10/2012	Approval 1/15/2017	Approval (March 2015 – March 2016)

For a long time, China has been one of the main countries that supply weapons and military equipment to Iran. In spite of the slow and limited cooperation, Iran is interested in the military capabilities and advanced technologies of China to develop weapons.

²² Legal and judicial agreements with other countries // Ministry of Justice of The Islamic Republic of Iran, URL: <http://justice.ir/Portal/View/Page.aspx?PageId=53cd90a2-770a-431c-bb86-d7b7430b1ca5&WebpartId=3571227f-eff7-45bf-9dc9-b0221bb22a6f> Visited on Feb. 26, 2019; 中国对外缔结的引渡条约清单 // 全国人民代表大会 (In Chinese: List of extradition treaties concluded by China//The National People's Congress), URL: http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/lfzt/rlvw/2017-12/24/content_2034956.htm Visited on Feb. 26, 2019; 中华人民共和国和伊朗伊斯兰共和国引渡条约 // 中华人民共和国司法部中国政府法制信息网, 2018年12月24日, (In Chinese: Agreement on extradition of criminals between China and Iran // Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, Dec. 24, 2019), URL: http://www.moj.gov.cn/Department/content/2018-12/24/360_182610.html Visited on Feb. 26, 2019; 司法协助类条约缔约情况一览表 // 中华人民共和国外交部 (In Chinese: List of Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/tytj_674911/tyfg_674913/default_1.shtml Visited on Feb. 26, 2019.

On the level of defense strategy, Iran has been interested in pursuing diplomatic and humanitarian Chinese involvement in the Middle East, which would complement Russian involvement and counterbalance that of the West and the United States²³.

Uncertain factors in relations between China and Iran.

These interests above have helped strengthen China-Iran relationship. In fact, despite the importance and role of common interests in promoting China-Iran relations in the Middle East after the Arab Spring, relations between two nations do not reach the highest level due to many problems that affect these relations.

The uncertainty of Iran's position on nuclear weapons.

After Donald Trump became the US's president, the United States have withdrawn the Iran nuclear deal, and the Iranian nuclear issue became unclear. How to solve the nuclear problem of Iran will affect the solution of the nuclear problem of North Korea, which is directly related to the core interests of China.

If the US's series of measures against Iran force Iran to respond fiercely, including abandoning this legally valid multilateral agreement, it is difficult to determine to what extent China can support Iran. In the short term, the future of Iran-China relations will "largely depend on the outcome of the talks between Iran and the European Union.

If Iran and the EU reach a major deal on the continuation of the deal, China will also help maintain a nuclear deal"²⁴; In the long run, although the tension is caused by the US, if the latter development

²³ Raz Zimmt, Israel Kanner, OfekIsh Maas, And Tal Avidan. *China-Iran Relations following the Nuclear Agreement and the Lifted Sanctions: Partnership Inc. // Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July 2017, pp. 53-54. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, URL: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/adkan20-Zimmt.pdf>

²⁴ Mohsen Shariati Nia (محسن شریعتی نیا), *Iran-China relations after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA*, in Persian, (روابط ایران و چین پس از خروج آمریکا از برجام), The Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM) Ankara, June 01, 2018, URL: <https://iramcenter.org/fa/china-and-iran-after-the-us-withdrawal-from-the-jcpoa/> Visited on April 24, 2019.

of this issue will become a negative international example, in order to prevent a similar situation on the North Korea's nuclear issue, China may reduce its support for Iran on the Security Council and the Iranian nuclear issue. This will affect the relationship between Iran and China.

US Energy Secretary Rick Perry approved "six secret authorizations", agreed to US companies to sell nuclear power technology to Saudi Arabia and assist Saudi Arabia in building nuclear power plants²⁵. Although the US said that Saudi Arabia is absolutely not allowed to possess nuclear weapons, the energy-rich Saudi Arabia's use of nuclear technology to build nuclear power plants has caused international suspicion. If the US indulges Saudi Arabia on nuclear power technology, it is unknown that how Iran's nuclear program will be. There will be a possibility of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East in the future.

In addition to the military, economic sanctions are closely linked to the nuclear deal. The US has imposed increasingly stringent sanctions on Iran, and every nation's cooperation with Iran will definitely not escape the US factor.

The influence of the US on economic cooperation between Iran and China.

Although Iran urgently needs to develop the economy and Iran's market and labor force also make foreign investors feel excited, the investment risk in Iran is high. The most influential reason is the US factor. The hostile policies of the two nations are currently difficult to change. The US's absolute sovereignty over the global financial system and the strong dependence of China on this financial system will cause Beijing to face a lot of restrictions on banking and financial transactions with Iran²⁶.

²⁵ 李月霞. 美国批准美国公司销售核能技术给沙特阿拉伯 // 新加坡《联合早报》, 2019年3月28日。(In Chinese: Li, Yue-xia. The United States Has Approved the Sale of Nuclear Energy Technology by US Companies to Saudi Arabia // Lianhe Zaobao, Singapore, March 28, 2019.) Visited on March 29, 2019. URL: <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/world/story20190328-943934>

²⁶ Mohsen Shariati Nia (محسن شریعتی نیا), Iran-China relations after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, in Persian, (روابط ایران و چین پس از خروج آمریکا از برجام), The Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM) Ankara, June 01, 2018, URL: <https://iramcenter.org/fa/china-and-iran-after-the-us-withdrawal-from-the-jcpoa/> Visited on April 24, 2019.

Therefore, financial cooperation has always been a weak item in China-Iran economic cooperation. It should be said that Western sanctions have brought business opportunities to Chinese companies, the reality is that it is difficult for international business organizations to bypass the US financial system and complete transactions with Iran. Enterprises will be difficult to construct due to financial difficulties. Some sanctions have imposed from the US on Chinese banks. For China, this also will affect the implementation of the “Belt and Road” Initiative in the Middle East.

Of course, changes in the security situation in the Middle East, which are closely related to behaviors of the US, will also influence Chinese companies’ intention to invest in Iran. Take automobile manufacturing as an example. Because the nuclear deal falters, Western car manufacturers are pulling out of Iran. In the absence of Western car makers, Chinese companies could take over the share of other foreign companies that had left the Iranian market. So, after the withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal, the Chinese cars were selling very well in Iran. Those cars are partly assembled in Iran²⁷. But the latest statistics released by the Iran’s Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade on the production of cars have clearly signaled the rollback of Chinese companies in the automotive industry in Iran. For example, Chery (Chinese automotive company) who in Iran under the title of "Modiran Khodro" (Iranian automotive company), has not produced. Also, Geely (Chinese automotive company) whose products "Bam Khodro" (Iranian automotive company) is hosting in Iran, has also no production in January 2019. Companies such as BYD, Lifan (Chinese automotive companies) have also been slowing down in production²⁸.

²⁷ Nasser Karimi. Iran’s domestic car market stalls as nuclear deal falters, September 21, 2018. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/irans-domestic-car-market-stalls-as-nuclear-deal-falters/>

²⁸ Economic report: The future of Chinese automakers in Iran, in Persian, (آینده خودروسازان چینی در ایران), 97/11/28, *The World of Economy* (دنیای اقتصاد), URL: <https://donya-e-egtesad.com/-آینده-خودروسازان-3497239/17-بخش-خودرو-چینی-در-ایران>

In terms of trade, in the past two years, on the one hand, international commodity prices have fallen, especially in accordance with the wishes of the United States, crude oil prices have plummeted; on the other hand, the economies of China and Iran have been sluggish, resulting in a decrease in import demand and bilateral trade volume.

Both China and Iran are countries with large state-owned enterprises. Therefore, trade with Iran will be easy to touch the red line of US sanctions. Even non-state-owned enterprises may also suffer sanctions from the US due to cooperation or trade relations with Iran. Both ZTE and Huawei are obvious examples. As the Sino-US trade war is intensifying, whether China will sacrifice the relationship with Iran in some certain areas in the compromise to the United States is also uncertain.

The influence of the US on China's foreign policy.

China and Iran are both diplomatic independent states. However, foreign policy will be affected by the international situation. The relationship with the United States, the most powerful nation in the world, is important to every country.

“Iran and China’s relations will continue in future due to both parties’ needs for energy, trade and mutual concerns in foreign diplomacy but there is little likelihood that these relations are promoted to a strategic level. China follows the model of peaceful rise in the international system and is not willing to dispute with Western countries and the US in particular over Iran”²⁹. For the moment, this view seems to be certain. So far, China’s forces are limited. Besides the economy, military hard power and soft power of China are relatively weak. China believes it can avoid the Thucydides trap.

²⁹ Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi, Rouhollah Zarei. *The Future of Iran-China Relations: An Alliance or Pure Cooperation?* // *Comparative Politics, Russia*. 2018, Vol.9 No. 1, p.71, URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-1-60-73>

It should be mentioned that peaceful rise in the international system is also one of China's foreign strategies³⁰. Therefore, one of the most important issues in China's foreign policy is its relationship with the United States.

Take the important platform and organization of China's participation in international affairs as an example. Iran joined the organization in 2005 as an observer member and applied for full membership in 2008. Since that year, this request has been made every time in the meeting, but it remains fruitless. The most key reason is that Iran's membership is bad news for Washington. The United States have long been trying to enforce policies that limit Tehran's control, so accepting Iran's membership will be costly for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization³¹. So, about Iran's membership, China takes a conservative stance.

Tense Iran's relations with countries on the Persian Gulf and Israel.

In addition to the hostile relationship between the US and Iran, Iran's tense relationship with US's allies as Saudi Arabia and Israel is also an influencing factor. "China's relations with Iran do not differ greatly from China's relations with other Middle Eastern countries"³². China has significant economic interests with the US, Saudi Arabia³³ and Iran. After all, the United States is China's largest trading partner and Saudi Arabia is China's largest supplier of oil. China and Israel are also closely

³⁰ The main external strategy of China can be designated as follows: (1) Ensuring a favorable international environment for the development and modernization of China; (2) To prevent attempts to curb China's development; (3) Ensuring the diversification of energy imports; (4) To prove and convince the world that China can "peacefully rise" (Based on the "five principles of peaceful coexistence", China actively participates in the development of peaceful diplomatic relations with all countries of the world); (5) Providing positive conditions for the progressive transformation of globalization and world order (Actively participating in global governance).

³¹ Mohsen Shariati Nia, (محسن شریعتی نیا) Shanghai Cooperation Organization policy toward Iran: When "yes" means "no", in Persian, «بله» معنای «نه» می دهد, (سیاست سازمان همکاری شانگهای در قبال ایران: وقتی «بله» معنای «نه» می دهد), June 19, 2018, The Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM) Ankara, URL: <https://iramcenter.org/fa/the-sco-policy-toward-iran-when-yes-means-no/>

³² Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi, Rouhollah Zarei. The Future of Iran-China Relations: An Alliance or Pure Cooperation? // Comparative Politics, Russia. 2018, Vol.9 No. 1, URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-1-60-73>

³³ Saudi Arabia is currently China's largest trading partner in the Middle East. In January 2019, the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also established a "comprehensive strategic partnership", as China and Iran did.

related to arms sales. Therefore, for China, factors such as the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel must be considered when working with Iran.

For Israel, China's support for Iran and Iranian poses a threat to Israeli national security, both regarding relations between the world powers and on the regional level. "Although China is engaged in relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel in parallel, in practice it has helped strengthen Iran in the military realm and other troubling areas, such as the evasion of sanctions, the advancement of its nuclear program, and the promotion of arrangements in Syria along Israel's border. One source of which Israel could attempt to influence Chinese policy is the United States. Israel would do well to consider the possibility of leveraging its relations with the United States as a means of pressuring China to reduce its relations with Iran"³⁴.

On the other side, after the war and conflicts in the Middle East, the entire region will be a new market for Chinese goods, not just Iran. The countries participating in the "Belt and Road" Initiative are also not only Iran, but also Saudi Arabia, a country that also has a large proportion of young people.

Iran's subjective choice.

For China, Iran has expectations for Western oil giants and companies. Since 2015, China's new projects in Iran have started less and the investment has declined. For many years, for large-scale engineering projects contracted by China, Iranian owners usually put forward clear requirements for the proportion of Western brands in the equipment procurement part³⁵. Although Iran has repeatedly

³⁴ Raz Zimmt, Israel Kanner, OfekIsh Maas, And Tal Avidan. *China-Iran Relations following the Nuclear Agreement and the Lifted Sanctions: Partnership Inc. // Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 20, No. 2, July 2017, pp. 53-54. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, URL: <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/adkan20-Zimmt.pdf>

³⁵ 陆瑾, 中东与“一带一路”建设, 载《阿拉伯世界研究》, 2016年第6期。(In Chinese: Lu, Jin. *The Middle East and the construction of the "Belt and Road" // Arab World Study*, 2016, No. 6.)

stated that Iran will not forget the help China has given because of cooperation with Europe, Japan, etc.³⁶

To some extent, this Iran's tendency and approach can be understood and may not be a problem. Iran wants to give some advantages to European countries, for example France or Italy that traditionally have better relations with Iran and at the time of sanctions keep them in his side. But, of course, these European companies don't accept this risk and after sanctions withdraw from Iran. Because for EU, comparing with the US, their trade with Iran is ignorable.

CONCLUSIONS.

The common interests of the two nations first appeared during the Cold War, when Sino-Soviet relations broke down and Sino-US relations improved. Mutual interests emerged after the Iran-Iraq war. Since the Islamic Revolution, the hostile relationship between Iran and the United States has turned the nuclear issue into an international problem. And China-Iran relations had passed through a chill due to the widening of Iran's problems with the international community, especially with regard to its nuclear program and sanctions.

After the Arab Spring, more threats to China's interests in the Middle East have been seen: China's national security were directly affected by the threat of energy security and a large number of extreme Muslims; China has also been under pressure from the US hegemony and American-led international public opinion on the Uighur issue in China. More instability in the region has had a negative impact on the construction of the "Belt and Road".

For Iran, the Iran nuclear deal has brought about a good international environment to obtain a large amount of income, and the Arab Spring has brought opportunities for the promotion of its status in

³⁶ 周戎: 《伊朗解禁, 中国商机多了还是少了? 》, 载《环球时报》, 2016年2月26日, 第7版。(In Chinese: Zhou, Rong. Iran has lifted the ban, is there more or less business opportunities for China? // Global Times, February 26, 2016, p. 7.)

the Middle East. So, we see that Iran chose temporary sacrifices of domestic economic development to invest financial resources in countries such as Syria, because it did not want to miss the “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity. But the increase in regional status has led to a stronger suppression by the United States, which has worsened the domestic economy and people's livelihood. Under this circumstance, Iran of course needs China's support; and China is very clear about how important Iran is a big country in the Middle East plays major role in maintaining regional peace and stability.

This opened the door for the development of cooperation between Iran and China in various fields, especially security and military, but on the one hand, Iran in China has found its international support in the face of American pressure and international sanctions, as well as supporting their roles in the Middle East (Iran's role and its ability to control the events in Iraq and Syria has been a great motivation for China to expand their common interests); on the other hand, China-Iran relations are not purely stable bilateral relations.

No matter how the relationship between the United States and Iran will become better or worse, it will affect China-Iran relations. Although China and Iran have found more common interests after the Arab Spring and their relationship has significantly developed, compared with the history of China-Iran relations, the two nations have been unable to ignore the influence of the US factor.

So, although China and Iran have attached great importance to developing their relations and expanding areas of political, economic, security and military cooperation, etc., their common interests are still based on the principle of "mutual benefit". Many factors may be considered to be obstacles to achieve a strategic alliance between the two nations.

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