

Opinion – Could the Sino-Iranian Agreement Weaken US Hegemony?

Written by Farhang Faraydoon Namdar

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FARHANG FARAYDOON NAMDAR, MAY 17 2021

No agreement between two states is more comprehensive than the Sino-Iranian agreement. In fact, it resembles a semi-confederacy, for the deal covers many critical areas such as security, economics, finances, and infrastructure. As the years pass, the respective economies will become more interdependent and interconnected, making the agreement more difficult to expire. It is over-simplistic to call it a \$400 billion deal, for its strategic significance, will determine the future of the Middle East.

The Iranian-Chinese deal was signed in a burgeoning multipolar world. For its part, the United States has increased its steps to create alliances in the Middle East. These alliances include Israel and Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. It also includes U.S. allies opposed to China, such as India. U.S. policies in the Middle East have effectively moved the Sunni Arab states closer to the Jewish state. Similarly, the Islamic Republic of Iran has moved closer to communist China. As predicted by Samuel Huntington, a division across civilizations theorized that the future international order would be across civilizations. Although Huntington considers Islam a civilization, it lacks a core representative state resulting in its division among other civilizations.

The alliance might also include the two Kurdish polities of Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava. Recently a senior U.S. delegation visited leaders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The delegation met with rival parties of the autonomous region: Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan that constitute the KRI. The KRI and Rojava are the remaining territories in Iraq and Syria where the U.S. military and diplomats are welcomed. The Kurdistan region of Iraq has severed its relations with Iraq and Iran since the 2017 independence referendum.

The most apparent reason for the U.S.-Sunni Arab-Israeli alliance is curtailing Iranian hegemony and, to a lesser degree, restraining Chinese influence in the region and dividing the U.S. burden in the area among its allies. The U.S.-led alliance could settle the Palestinian-Israeli problem that will deprive Iran of exploiting the Palestinian cause. Iran has usually supported Palestinian groups. However, Iran's intervention in the various Middle Eastern States is not based on one single factor. Its support for Bashar Al-Assad is based on geopolitical calculations rather than ideological. Thus, even without a cause, Iran has many reasons to intervene in the region.

For instance, Iraq contains the key to the stability of Iran due to its holy Shiite sites. Because the Islamic republic is fragmented across ethnic, linguistic, and geographic lines, Shiite Islam is the only uniting factor common to more than 90% of the country. Securing Shiite temples in Baghdad is of paramount importance for Iran.

The alliance also establishes de facto control of strategic sea routes. The Chinese economy depends on sea routes from the Strait of Malacca to the Suez Canal. For instance, China imports almost 75 percent of its oil consumption, and this dependence could be weaponized against Beijing. China relies on U.S.-guarded maritime routes to import its energy. In an increasingly hostile relationship with the U.S., China is obliged to reconsider its energy security, which brings Iran to the center of the equation.

Almost a third of the allocated sum in the Iran-China deal, \$280 billion, would be spent on petrochemical

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infrastructure. It suggests that China would increasingly rely on Iran for its energy, giving Iran significant leverage over energy-hungry China. It makes Iran an indispensable ally for China while maintaining the United States and Israel—“the great and small Satan”—are its enemies.

The agreement also includes stationing 5,000 Chinese troops inside Iran. Iranian acquiescence might raise some fundamental questions about its authority, considering that it has strived to preserve its independence for four decades at a grave cost. Yet Iran appears willing to accept this deal to make China dependent on its energy sector.

Since the Achaemenid Empire, Iran has controlled much of the Middle East. It has also attempted to reach the shores of the Mediterranean. Currently, Iran holds levers of power in four ancient, prominent Middle Eastern cities: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana'a, making Iran the pivotal state in the Middle East. This form of Empire is modern. Its vassals, or proxies, are more popular than vassal states in history. The Persian Empires did not have half of the influence in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a compared to what Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) now enjoys. It was thousands of kilometers away with primitive communication abilities. In contrast, the IRGC is now one click away.

The killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's IRGC-Quds Force, marked the end of U.S. political strength in Baghdad. It revealed that Iran was more powerful politically in Baghdad than the United States. It also showed how influential Iran had become in securing political agreements with Middle Eastern politicians. Iran further played its political hand by having the Iraqi Parliament vote to expel the U.S. presence from the country, engendering a Persian stronghold in the Middle East.

Iran exercises a significant soft power in the Middle East. It spends only a billion dollars on its proxies, a negligible sum compared to what the United States and its allies spend. Iran doesn't only support Shia groups; it also backs Sunni groups such as Hamas. With Tehran as the center of arbitration for much of Middle Eastern affairs, Chinese economic might will seal Iran's grip on the region.

Iran has an outsized influence in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria through its proxies and pro-Iranian groups. After years of civil war and insurgencies, these countries have been devastated. Iran's political and economic might in the Middle East has worked to grant contracts to pro-Iranian corporations to revitalize the region in ways favorable to Iranian interests. The Chinese lavish Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) falls in the same category. It has great potential to assist in rebuilding infrastructure in the Middle East.

The United States has historically played an active role in rebuilding regions where it has operated. Although the United States has spent trillions of dollars in the Middle East, it has neglected building Middle Eastern infrastructure. The region was relatively in better shape 20 years ago in some respects, including security. However, reconstructing Iraq after 2003 was mostly done through Turkish and Iranian construction firms. In the long term, this will further augment Iran's soft regional power. Courtesy of Chinese economic might, Iran can rebuild and, with that, legitimize its political position in the region by lifting millions out of poverty.

A prime example of this is when Iraq signed a three-billion-dollar oil deal with China. China subsequently provided humanitarian assistance to Yemen and has used diplomatic ties to serve Iranian interests in Syria. Since the BRI passes through the volatile Middle East, Iran shows that it can be an indispensable ally in promoting the stability and security that Chinese investment projects require. Iran's assistance in defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria helped maintain the loyalty of various non-state actors in the region.

Iran could become the guardian of the BRI in the Middle East. A region of paramount importance to China and a market with empty shelves that China will be happy to fill. Through the BRI, Iran could further bolster its image and consolidate its hegemony in the region to bring economic prosperity, comparable to the U.S. securing the global ocean routes that paved the way for China's rise. This would also discredit the U.S. claim that Iran thrives on chaos and poverty and assertions that Iran sponsors terrorism. It also makes China less dependent on the U.S.-guarded maritime routes.

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Hardliners are at the forefront of the upcoming Iranian presidential elections, making a renewed deal with the U.S. doubtful. Although economic opportunities have been denied to Iran by the U.S. and would be denied further without an agreement to replace the JCPOA, Iran could renew itself economically with the help of Chinese economic might. The Sino-Iranian agreement will help to bypass U.S. global economic power and increase Iranian economic efforts. An Iran without economic sanctions could become a regional hegemon as, despite U.S.-led sanctions, Iran's allies are deeply entrenched in the Middle East.

About the author:

Farhang Faraydoon Namdar is a researcher and journalist covering the Middle East. His work has been published in E-International Relations, The National Interest, and Middle East Monitor, among various other outlets. His works have been translated into over ten languages. He is currently a Teaching Assistant at Missouri State University in the Department of Political Science and Philosophy.