

Is China Playing a Dual Game in Iran?

One aspect of China's Iran policy suggests a sincere effort to uphold the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime in cooperation with the United States. Another suggests that Beijing believes a nuclear-armed or nuclear-armed-capable Iran would serve China's geopolitical interests in the Persian Gulf region.¹ Is China playing a dual game toward Iran? This question cannot be answered with certainty, but given its importance, a tentative and necessarily somewhat speculative effort to think through the matter is in order.

Over the past decade, Beijing has significantly cooperated with the United States in attempting to ensure that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons in violation of its NPT obligations. In 1997, Beijing withdrew from nuclear cooperation with Iran under heavy U.S. pressure and as part of a deliberate effort to expand Beijing's cooperation with Washington.² Since 2006, China has voted first to have the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council under Article 7 of the UN Charter dealing with threats to international peace. It then voted "yes" to a series of Security Council resolutions demanding that Iran cease uranium enrichment as well as plutonium reprocessing, and that Tehran cooperate fully with the IAEA's efforts to verify that Iran's nuclear programs are not geared to produce nuclear weapons. Each of those Security Council resolutions imposed increasingly broad sanctions (even if only marginally so) against Iran for refusing Security Council demands. This aspect of Beijing's policy behavior suggests that China has been an emerging strategic partner of the United States.

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However, Beijing delayed the passage of each of the Security Council resolutions, gaining perhaps several years for Tehran to rush forward with its nuclear programs. Beijing's diplomacy also considerably watered down each of the UN sanctions, narrowing their disruption of Iran's activities, making them voluntary rather than mandatory, and most importantly, ensuring that they did not hobble Iran's production and export of energy or Chinese investment in Iran's energy sector. Iran's revenues from energy exports have, of course, been its main source of income and have funded its nuclear projects. As Western and East Asian firms withdrew from commercial involvement with Iran as Security Council and extra-U.N. sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union intensified, Chinese firms moved to seize the opportunities offered by an increasingly besieged Tehran. By 2010, China had become the major foreign investor in Iran's energy sector, far exceeding any other country.³

Beijing has also assisted Iran in its efforts to escape U.S.-backed international isolation. The annual almanac issued by China's foreign ministry records the relatively robust level of high-level Chinese-Iranian interactions as international concern over Iran's nuclear programs mounted during the 2000s.⁴ China's assistance to Iran in Security Council debates, the tendency of Chinese spokesmen to cast the Iranian nuclear issue as a clash between the United States and Iran, rather than between the international community and Iran, and frequent mutual visits of high-level officials probably went some distance in helping Tehran legitimize its nuclear policies to the Iranian people. China's support and friendship demonstrated that Iran did not stand alone.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) also reports that China was Iran's second-largest weapons supplier from 2002–2009.⁵ Many of these are sophisticated items specifically developed to counter U.S. naval and air forces. China has also transferred an array of sophisticated industrial technology to Iran in contravention of both China's own technology transfer controls (developed under U.S. prompting) and U.S. unilateral legislation. In their study of Iran's Chinese energy partners, Mark Dubowitz and Laura Grossman identified 89 instances in which the U.S. government sanctioned Chinese entities (many of which were state-owned enterprises) for transferring restricted items to Iran between 1997 and 2010. In October 2010, the Obama administration reportedly concluded that Chinese firms were assisting Iran's nuclear and missile programs in violation of Security Council sanctions. Robert Einhorn, the State Department's special adviser for nonproliferation, was dispatched to Beijing with a list of companies involved and a request for action by the Chinese government to end these transfers, which were said to involve items such as high pressure gauges and carbon fiber, both for the production of centrifuges. A senior U.S. official said the administration had concluded that the Chinese government had not authorized these transfers.⁶ This robust pattern of

Chinese activity suggests that at least some of China's leaders believe a strong, nuclear-armed or nuclear-armed-capable Iran would be a valuable check on U.S. influence in the Persian Gulf and move the world in the direction of multipolarity.

It is difficult for outside observers to know if Beijing is playing a dual game in Iran. Very few people really know, as confident knowledge one way or the other would require access to deliberations at the highest levels of China's leadership. China's political system is not transparent, foreign and security policy issues are well guarded, and this sort of macro-level strategic decision would be especially closely held. Instead, central guidance to lower-level personnel would likely lay out what inquisitive foreigners should be told. A good initial assumption would be not to take denials of duplicity at face value. Chinese actions speak louder than words.

Oil or Countering U.S. Hegemony Too?

There is a simple, yet sound, economic explanation for China's dual or bifurcated behavior toward Iran's nuclear programs. China has contradictory interests in the Gulf generally, and regarding the Iranian nuclear issue specifically, and balances those contradictory interests in an effort to protect both. On one hand, Beijing wants access to Iran's fabulously rich but still largely unexploited oil and gas resources to meet China's skyrocketing demand for imported energy. A level of Chinese support for Tehran in the Security Council gives Beijing leverage to access Iran's oil riches and encapsulates the energy supply relation in layers of political cooperation, which Beijing hopes will insulate that energy flow in the event of various shocks.⁷ On the other hand, Beijing must cooperate strategically with the United States to maintain a favorable macro-climate for China's development drive.⁸

This "conflicting interests" explanation is sound and goes a long way toward understanding Beijing's seemingly schizophrenic approach, but national strategies seldom rest on a single set of goals and calculations. Several sets of circumstantial evidence suggest that there is, in fact, an "anti-hegemony" dimension to China's policy. The oil access explanation is not necessarily contradictory with this explanation.

One piece of evidence is the pronounced criticism of the hegemonic designs of the United States found in both Chinese media and Chinese scholarly analysis. The dominant view among Chinese analysts is that the core rationale of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf, including its policies toward Iran and Iraq, is to

Circumstantial evidence suggests there is an antihegemony dimension to China's policy.

achieve control of that region's oil in order to coerce the consumers of that oil (Europe, India, Japan, and, of course, China) as part of a long-term drive for world domination.⁹ For example, in September 2002, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) newspaper *Jiefangjun bao* explained the then-looming U.S. war in Iraq by arguing that "Iraq's oil will have a direct impact on the . . . world economy for the next 30 years and [will be] an important tool to decide whether the United States can control the lifeline of the world economy."¹⁰

According to the dominant Chinese view, the demise of the Soviet Union created an extremely unbalanced international situation that the United States has exploited to bring Persian Gulf oil under its control. In this mainstream Chinese view, the 1991 war against Iraq, "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran in the 1990s, the 2003 war in Iraq, and now the U.S. push to subordinate Iran all point to the goal of U.S. hegemony. Once a "democratic" regime is installed in Tehran, U.S. clients will be in power in all the major Persian Gulf oil states.

According to China's media and scholars, the United States also imagines that it can impose its values and systems on the people of the Persian Gulf, and goes about doing so in various ways. These sources believe that U.S. aggression and interference in the internal affairs of the Persian Gulf countries is, in fact, a major source of instability in the region. If Iran arms itself, it does so to a substantial degree in response to the arrogant and aggressive policies of the United States toward Iran, Chinese analysts frequently suggest. China itself has been the target of U.S. "interference" and attempted domination in the past, and now cannot but sympathize with the resistance of the people of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. drive for Persian Gulf and global hegemony will certainly fail, according to this line of thought, and would eventually "enfeeble" the United States and "bring it to a situation of strategic decline."¹¹

But do China's leaders believe their own propaganda? Not necessarily. One saying attributed to Mao was, in fact, "Comrades, we must beware of believing our own propaganda." A major function of China's media, and for that matter its academic journals, is to mobilize public opinion in support of the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Portraying a world beset by evil U.S. machinations helps justify the Party's continuing one-party authoritarian rule. It also helps inoculate China's people against influence by Western political ideas. Thus, it would be incorrect to assume that the anti-hegemony content of Chinese media and academic journals necessarily matches the views of China's top leaders. But it is difficult to believe that the theme of Chinese media and scholarship would not reflect the views of at least some high-level Chinese leaders.

Analysts have long noted that, as revolutionary ideology faded, calculations of Realpolitik solidified a hold over Chinese foreign-policy thinking.¹² In Realpolitik terms, a number of advantages would accrue to China from a nuclear-armed or

nuclear-armed-capable Iran. In the remote but real contingency of a U.S.–China clash over Japan, Korea, or Taiwan, and in the event that efforts to swiftly end that war failed, Washington might attempt to cut off China’s oil imports. China’s ability to import oil overland via Central Asian or Myanmar would depend on Persian Gulf suppliers willing to ignore U.S. wrath and put oil into China’s strategic overland pipelines. A nuclear-armed Iran would be a good candidate to cooperate with China in such an extreme situation, perhaps the only one given the pro-U.S. alignments of all other Gulf oil states.

A strong Iran resistant to U.S. dictates and at odds with the United States would also force Washington to keep large military forces in the region, limiting the ability of the United States to concentrate forces in East Asia, where China’s core interests lie. The 9-11 attacks on the United States were a strategic windfall for China, diverting U.S. attention away from China and East Asia toward the Middle East and Islamic world. That the United States bogged itself down in protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq was a further blessing for Beijing. If Washington now were to wade deeper into conflict in the Middle East—this time with Iran—the chances for China’s successful rise without having to confront the United States would increase. In this regard, it would not benefit China to help the United States coerce Iran into de-nuclearization and corresponding docility.

By standing with Iran in its hour of need, China also builds a strategic partnership with a major regional power that has considerable national coherence and ambition, and with which China has a centuries-long tradition of strategic cooperation. Unlike India, Japan, and Russia, Asia’s other major powers, China has never been in conflict with Iran. Tehran, therefore, may be likely to wholeheartedly welcome China’s emergence as the pre-eminent power in Asia, and be Beijing’s long-term, sincere, and strategic partner. Support for Iran now is an investment in that future partnership.

China does not believe that partnering with the U.S. secures the flow of oil.

Amity and Cooperation with the United States

Against these concerns, Chinese decisionmakers undoubtedly weigh the extremely important benefits of cooperating with the United States. The United States itself, in arguing that it and China should forge a genuine strategic cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue, has stated that the two countries share common interests and should cooperate on that basis. There are two main common interests, in the U.S. view: 1) maintaining the uninterrupted flow of oil

at stable and moderate prices from the Gulf, and 2) preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, it appears that Chinese do not generally accept the first argument. In 2008, this author and a colleague spent 10 days in Beijing interviewing approximately 40 Chinese specialists, and deliberately floated the proposition that by cooperating with the United States, China could secure its flow of Gulf oil. Among these analysts, we found only one or two who agreed with that proposition. The more common response was that this argument was tantamount to a U.S. invitation for China to become a junior partner in U.S. hegemonic schemes, something in which China was not interested. Chinese analysts tend to believe that U.S. policies of sanctions as well as the threat and use of force (e.g. during the Iran–Iraq “tanker war” of the 1980s, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 war with Iraq) pose the primary dangers to the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Gulf. Not Iran.

Beijing, like Washington, is sometimes tolerant of nuclear proliferation.

Regarding nuclear nonproliferation, China, as a nuclear-weapons state under the NPT, of course desires that fewer states have nuclear weapons. But China’s nonproliferation interests in the Gulf are considerably less important than U.S. interests. China has no troops, warships, bases, or allies in the Persian Gulf; the United States does. Beijing has not undertaken measures to ensure the flow of oil from the Gulf; Washington has. There are at least two other cases—Pakistan and North Korea—where Beijing has apparently decided that nuclear proliferation serves important Chinese interests. In the case of Pakistan, China helped Pakistan develop

nuclear weapons and refused U.S. demands circa 1997 to disengage from nuclear cooperation with Pakistan.¹³ Then, following the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, Beijing worked to direct U.S. ire away from Pakistan and toward India, lest Islamabad slide further into dangerous international isolation that might upset the South Asian balance of power constraining India.¹⁴

In the case of North Korea, Beijing seems to have decided that denuclearization of North Korea is less important than the continued survival of the Pyongyang regime and stability on—i.e. the continued division of—the peninsula. China’s position on Iran may follow the same logic—the geopolitical gains from a nuclear Iran simply outweigh the losses to China from further fraying of the NPT regime. According to a recent study, even the United States itself has sometimes acquiesced to nuclear weapons activities because of a higher priority on other objectives (e.g. tolerating A.Q. Khan’s activities—fully but secretly backed by the Pakistani military—for the sake of Pakistan’s support of

the Afghan jihad).¹⁵ India is another example of U.S. accommodation to nuclear weapons proliferation. China, like the United States, is sometimes tolerant of nuclear proliferation. The costs to China of Iranian proliferation are substantially less than North Korean proliferation.

It is likely that Chinese leaders have understood all along that efforts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue via “negotiations and dialogue” alone would give time for Iran to move forward with its plans for nuclear weapons or a nuclear-weapons capability. In 1991, they certainly understood that their opposition to the war to undo Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait meant accepting the permanent annexation of that country by Iraq. Yet Beijing opposed a U.S.-led and Security Council-authorized war to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty, favoring continued negotiations instead. Beijing deemed the 1991 war a conflict between “global hegemony” (the United States) and “regional hegemony” (Iraq).¹⁶ Its preference for a peaceful settlement of that issue was in effect a choice for the lesser evil of Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait rather than strengthened U.S. hegemony over the Gulf. Similarly, China’s insistence since 2003 of a settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue only via negotiations and dialogue, excluding strong coercive measures, may in fact be acquiescence to Iranian nuclearization.

Does China Think Sanctions Just Don’t Work?

One reason for China’s acquiescence may be Beijing’s skeptical view of U.S.-promoted sanctions against Iran. China views economic sanctions as a tool that strong, typically Western countries use against weak, typically non-Western countries. China itself has been a frequent target of U.S. and Western sanctions—in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and again after the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989. Moreover, Western-inspired sanctions are often viewed as involving interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries, and/or the application of rules or laws based on Western traditions and values. In short, the frequent U.S. resort to economic sanctions is viewed as part and parcel of the U.S. drive for global hegemony that must be discarded.

China objects to many of the sanctions insisted on by the United States on the grounds that those sanctions are based solely on U.S. law and not on international agreements. Since 1979, the United States has put in place laws penalizing U.S. or third-country entities which transfer weapons, missiles, and missile technologies to Iran or invest substantially in Iran’s energy sector. Typically, third-country firms are penalized by imposing various restrictions on their access to U.S. markets. Beijing rejects the notion that it is bound by unilateral U.S. determinations to which it has not agreed. These Chinese sentiments must be taken at face value and as sincere. Yet U.S. officials presumably tried long and hard—ultimately unsuccessfully—to secure Chinese

agreement and cooperation for measures advocated by the United States. It is unclear, however, if China refused to expand its cooperation with the United States in these areas in order to maneuver Washington into failing to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or a nuclear-weapons capability.

China says it does not support sanctions against Iran because Beijing views sanctions as counterproductive. Especially when directed against proud, nationalist countries, the Chinese see sanctions as leading to countermeasures and a further escalation of tensions. Sanctions are seen as not conducive to resolving international problems, and may even be a step toward the use of military force. Chinese analysts often note the progression of U.S. policy against Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003 from a push for international economic sanctions to international authorization of the use of force to a military strike. War does not fit with China's drive for sustained and rapid economic development, Beijing insists. The 2003 war in Iraq, for example, led to a complete collapse of China's oil imports from that country. A war involving Iran and the resulting spike in global oil prices would hit China's economic growth even harder.

China believes sanctions lead to countermeasures and a further escalation of tensions.

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of these Chinese beliefs. They beg the question, however, of whether Iran's leadership, left to its own devices and without international sanctions but subject only to purely diplomatic efforts, would abandon its quest for nuclear weapons or a nuclear-weapons capability. Having born so much international pressure and opprobrium to push forward with its nuclear programs, is it reasonable to conclude that Iran would have abandoned those programs without that pressure and condemnation? Would China's hard-headed

leaders really believe this? Wouldn't sanctions at least slow Iran's efforts, even if they don't reverse them?

There is also the question of why China, if it has been so opposed to sanctions, finally and repeatedly agreed to slates of sanctions, albeit watered-down ones. China could have vetoed the various drives for sanctions in the Security Council. Why didn't it? One probable answer is that not vetoing but cooperating with the United States served China's interest of maintaining comity in its relations with the United States and, even more, of encouraging the United States to view China as a strategic partner.

Another theme of Chinese commentary is that sanctions against Iran are ineffective and will fail. Yet, a major objective of China's UN sanctions diplomacy has been to ensure that sanctions are narrow, often voluntary, and most important of all, do not interfere with the investment of China or other countries in Iran's oil

and gas sectors. In other words, it is plausible that China's efforts at the UN have been targeted toward ensuring that the sanctions will be ineffective and will fail.

Are sanctions really the problem? In other cases, China has not been reluctant to use economic sanctions as a threat or actually impose them on countries that trample Chinese interests. In September 2010, for example, after Japan detained a Chinese fishing-boat captain because of an incident in the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands, China took several actions in response. It suspended coal and aviation cooperation talks with Japan, directed Chinese tour companies to suspend tours of Japan, slowed custom's inspections of Japanese goods, may have ordered the arrest of four Japanese executives, and may have cut exports of rare earth elements to Japan. Beijing's arrest and conviction of Rio Tinto employees early in 2010 shortly after that company played a role in forcing higher iron ore prices on China, or its occasional punishment of countries and companies because of their relations with Taiwan, are further examples of Beijing's willingness to resort to sanctions. Sanctions in and of themselves seem not to be the problem. The problem for Beijing is whether or not sanctions serve China's interests. In the case of Iran, Beijing appears to have concluded they do not, and uses lofty moral arguments to state China's position.

It is certainly clear that one reason for China's support of Iran in IAEA and UN debates has been to secure access to Iran's rich energy resources. By rendering diplomatic support to Iran, Beijing demonstrated to Tehran that China was a friendly, understanding, and capable country. It made sense for Tehran to look upon such a country as a reliable partner in developing Iran's energy resources. Beijing's efforts paid off in 2009 when China became by far the leading foreign partner in Iran's energy sector.

The issue could be stated even more broadly, however. China recognizes Iran as an important regional power and seeks to build a stable partnership with that country, similar to the one China enjoys with Pakistan. Beijing does this by helping Iran's government—of whatever complexion it might be—with the national objectives Tehran specifies. If Iran's government has decided in favor of nuclear weapons or a nuclear-weapons capability, China seeks to offer what assistance it can—within the parameters of China's obligations under the NPT and without spoiling Sino-U.S. relations. Stated differently, China's long-term interest lies in a partnership with Iran, whether Iran has a nuclear capability or not.

But are there people in China's decisionmaking elite who believe that a nuclear-armed Iran would align with China's interest of moving the world toward multipolarity, draining U.S. strength to China's advantage? Policies are often adopted by coalitions made up of people with quite different reasons for supporting the same policies. Foreign scholars of China's foreign relations believe that, at several points in the past two decades, debates have erupted within the Chinese elite over the emphasis given to anti-hegemony in Chinese policy toward

the United States. Critics of the mainstream policy of avoiding confrontation with the United States called, instead, for more assertive policies in response to perceived U.S. transgressions of China's interests. Perhaps China's bifurcated Iran policies reflect a bifurcated Party elite?

China's Decisionmaking Process: Bureaucratic Politics or Strategy?

Foreign analysts know exceedingly little about the process through which China's foreign policy and national security decisions are made. An informed guess suggests that basic decisions regarding China's policies toward the Iranian–U.S. confrontation would be made by about eight members of the Foreign Affairs Leadership Small Group, advised by the chief of staff of the PLA, another five or so advisers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and probably expanded to include military leaders responsible for national security issues.¹⁷

The PLA has a strong corporatist identity and views itself as the protector of China's security and core values. Its view of the world tends to be a combination of Realpolitik and residual ideological influences from Mao's anti-hegemony theories. It is one of the least internationally connected of the institutions that run China, and its leaders are inclined toward sinister interpretations of U.S. policy, according to which Washington is trying to stifle China's rise. PLA colonels and generals comment regularly in public on U.S. containment policy, the U.S. desire to encircle China, and the general U.S. threat, as well as about the need for China to abandon illusions and more forcefully confront U.S. anti-China machinations. A recent example was a popular 2010 book entitled *C-shaped Encirclement*, authored by a PLA air force colonel, which argues that the United States is constructing a ring stretching from Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia in the north, through the South China Sea, and to India in the south in pursuit of the final "carving up and destruction of China."¹⁸

It is likely that China's generals stress the value of the geopolitical gains from a strong and anti-U.S. Iran. It is also probable that PLA officials are sometimes critical of the weakness of the Foreign Ministry in defending China's interests. Their views would, in turn, be given careful attention by ambitious members of the Political Bureau who aspire to become China's designated paramount leader, when Hu Jintao resigns in 2012–2013, and who are concerned with the stark reality of CCP regime survival. While the selection of Politburo members to become China's paramount leader involves negotiations among several hundred elites, top PLA leaders have a strong say in the outcome of this crucial succession contest. Any CCP leader who aspires to be the top-ranked leader must demonstrate to the PLA his tough-mindedness, and an inadequately firm policy toward the United States would be the kiss-of-death.

After the Tiananmen Square incident and the collapse of Eastern European and Soviet communist regimes, CCP leaders have paid great attention to meeting PLA needs. One of the lessons drawn by the CCP from the Soviet collapse in 1991 was the absolute need for the Party to retain the loyalty of the army.¹⁹ Large defense budgets and higher salaries help, as does intensive indoctrination via the CCP's political commissar system within the PLA, but so too does solicitous Party attention to the PLA's views on core issues. The ultrarapid pace of China's contemporary modernization is producing great social tension in a multitude of forms, and CCP leaders are afraid that this social dynamite might explode to produce some sort of challenge to the regime. In such a situation, the loyalty of the PLA would be the bulwark of continuing CCP rule. Given the PLA perception that the United States is striving to encircle, contain, and destabilize China, it makes sense for China to respond by moving beyond the East Asian quadrant and initiating a counter-encircling move in Iran.

If Beijing is indeed playing a dual game over Iran's nuclear programs, does that derive from these succession politics, typical bureaucratic politics, or a strategic choice? It is likely a combination of all three.

There are probably differing opinion groups among the Chinese leadership on this issue. One, perhaps with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the core, would take a less sinister view of, and be more favorable toward cooperation with, the United States. This group probably views nuclear nonproliferation as a common interest with the United States, and sees U.S.–Chinese cooperation on the issue as a ballast stabilizing that relationship. Nonetheless, even this pro-U.S. group probably ranks Iranian nonproliferation well below where its

counterparts in the U.S. government would place it, and sees relatively few direct injuries to China's interests resulting from Iranian nuclearization.

Another group, probably with PLA leaders at its core, believes China needs to take a tougher, more hard-headed approach to U.S. transgressions against Chinese interests. This group likely stresses the power advantages that would accrue to China if the United States is forced to deal with a nuclear-armed Iran. U.S. hegemony has made a mess in the Persian Gulf and should be allowed to stew in it—to China's advantage—in the view of this military group. An oil faction representing China's powerful national oil companies might join the military group in lobbying for seizing the opportunities created by U.S. sanctions for China to push even further into Iran's rich energy sector.

Do Beijing's actions derive from succession politics, bureaucratic politics, or strategic choice?

China's paramount leader, currently Hu Jintao, would mediate these divergent points of view with an eye toward maintaining credibility with the PLA. Anyone deemed inadequately tough by the PLA leadership—and perhaps even by the mid-level colonels—is unlikely to secure or retain military support. Complete cooperation with Washington would also stymie the efforts by Chinese petroleum firms to expand into Iran's rich energy sector. But China's leaders would also realize that deterioration of China's relations with the United States could injure China's economic development drive, and that the U.S. desire for strategic partnership confers great advantages on China. Complete non-cooperation with Washington would run counter to maintaining a favorable "macro-climate" for China's development drive and its diplomatic "rise."

**Sino-U.S.
partnership will not
be possible if Beijing
pursues a dual game
in the Persian Gulf.**

There is probably a strong element of inertia in China's policies toward Iran's nuclear program. Almost certainly, the basic decision to cooperate with the United States in the Security Council by ultimately agreeing to U.S.-sponsored Security Council resolutions—albeit after weakening them—was made prior to China's agreement in July 2006 to the first Security Council resolution on the Iranian nuclear issue. Subsequent Chinese decisions about when to oppose or

resist, and when to finally agree to U.S. proposals would probably be made on the basis of the earlier decision. Changing such a long-standing policy is probably very difficult.

Are Sincerity and Trust Possible?

The circumstantial evidence suggests that China is playing a dual game in Iran. Beijing seeks to convince U.S. leaders that China is a willing and responsible partner in maintaining the NPT regime, but it also helps Iran win the time, international space, and continuing economic wherewithal necessary for it to push its nuclear plans to a successful outcome. There is no smoking gun pointing to this conclusion, and a plausible economic explanation of China's behavior is available. But that economic explanation is not incompatible with a strategic explanation. Several pieces of circumstantial evidence point toward a Chinese conclusion that Iranian nuclearization would fit with China's geostrategic interests: the anti-hegemony line of China's media and scholarship; the calculus of power in today's world and China's close attention to such matters; the actual outcome of China's policy of delay and opposition to strong sanctions; China's robust supply of military technology and sophisticated industrial equipment to

Iran; and the anti-hegemony worldview of the PLA and its role in CCP succession politics and regime survival. The evidence is ambiguous and circumstantial, but on balance points toward the conclusion that Beijing is, in fact, playing a dual game.

The standing U.S. offer to China during the administrations of George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton (the later years), George W. Bush, and now Barack Obama has been that the two countries should become partners in addressing common interests and world problems. This is a solid approach that comports with the interests of both countries. It also offers the best prospect for making the 21st century less tragic than its predecessor. But genuine Sino–U.S. partnership will not be possible if China is and continues to pursue a dual game in the Persian Gulf. At some point, Chinese subterfuge will be understood by the United States, and will undermine confidence and trust. China will eventually have to make a choice regarding its relationship with the United States that will shape the macro-climate for its rise in the 21st century—sincere cooperation in the Persian Gulf as part of a genuine global partnership, or strategic rivalry.

Notes

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17. The Foreign Affairs Small Leadership Group likely includes President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, National Security Adviser Dai Bingguo, and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. On a security-heavy issue such as the Iranian nuclear issue, Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie and Central Military Commission vice chairs General Guo Boxiong and General Xu Caihou would probably be included.
18. Dai Xu, *C-xing baowei: neiyao waihuan xia de zhongguo tuwei* [C-shaped Encirclement: China’s Breakout of Encirclement under Internal and External Threats] (Shanghai: Wenhui Press, 2010).
19. David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China’s Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 22–31.