

THE | DIPLOMAT

FLASHPOINTS | DIPLOMACY | CENTRAL ASIA

Iran's New Doctrine: Pivot to the East

A convergence of interests (read: opposition to the U.S.) is bringing Iran, China, and Russia closer together than ever.

By **Seyed Hossein Mousavian**

October 05, 2020



Credit: [Flickr/ Nick Taylor](#)

Over the past few months, Iran has been working with China on a sweeping long-term political, economic, and security agreement that would facilitate hundreds of billions of dollars of investments in the [Iranian economy](#). It is also pursuing a long-term partnership with Russia. Politicians in Tehran see the agreements as a necessary means of combating U.S. hegemony and [hostility](#).

Iran's new policy of a "[Pivot to the East](#)" involves cultivating strong economic, political, military, and security ties with the giants of the Asian continent, namely, China and Russia. This policy has gained all the more credibility among Iranian officials after the United States' ill-advised move to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, colloquially known as the Iran nuclear deal) and pursue a "maximum pressure" strategy.

The JCPOA was an international agreement between Iran and world powers endorsed by the [U.N. Security Council in Resolution 2231](#).

But while the Iranians fully implemented the deal, the United States withdrew from it under the Trump administration and the European Union subsequently failed to fulfill its responsibilities under the agreement. The upshot of the U.S. withdrawal and European complacency was a revival of sanctions at a pace and intensity unprecedented over the past 40 years. This has emboldened Iran's long-debated strategy of adopting a "Look East" foreign policy, as the JCPOA experience convinced the Iranians that no matter how much goodwill is demonstrated, the West is both unreliable and untrustworthy.

Meanwhile, Iran has found willing partners to its east. Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing are opposed to U.S. military and interventionist policies in the Middle East and seek to eliminate the supremacy of the U.S. dollar looming over the world economy. Although it is not clear whether the three capitals have reached a consensus on a trilateral comprehensive alliance, they are examining serious steps in this direction. Three capitals [participated in](#) a four-day joint military exercise in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman in 2019. In July, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Moscow to extend a 20-year cooperation agreement [with Russia](#). In 2016, China agreed to raise the level of China–Iran bilateral trade to \$600 billion in 10 years, although that goal will be almost impossible to meet now. A comprehensive strategic deal is currently under negotiations.

Iran and China have similar interests in the domain of energy diplomacy. Securing sustainable sources of energy such as oil and gas is vital to China's economic growth and Iran can be a steady supplier. While major Arab oil-producing countries are aligned with the United States, Iran is not under U.S. influence. On the other hand, Washington's "maximum pressure" approach has brought Iran's oil exports close to [zero](#) barrels a day. Exporting oil to China will thus serve Iran's interests. For its part, Russia has long been the dominant supplier of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe, but its position in terms of exports has been challenged by the United States. Therefore, the [mutual reliance](#) of the three capitals on energy – where they all face challenges from Washington – is a fact that cannot be denied.

[Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

Iran is a regional power in the Middle East and has founded its foreign policy on the basis of "resisting" U.S. hegemony. But in the process of resisting numerous forces of U.S. pressure, its economy has suffered from a lack of opportunities that would have otherwise been made available to it – opportunities worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Iran has paid the price for its resistance strategy. Now Tehran presents itself as a unique opportunity for countries like China and Russia to build long-term alliances. Iran's defeat will be counted as the victory of the United States and

its regional allies, and in return, Iran's success could be a determining factor in a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East – once and for all. Already, following the U.S. failure in wars on Afghanistan and Iraq and partnership with Saudi Arabia in attacking Yemen, it has become clear that the United States is no longer the dominant “superpower” in the Middle East. The traditional allies of the U.S. are in profound crises and their positions are particularly weakened. There is a vacuum of power in the Middle East that needs to be redressed.

Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing too have common strategic and long-term interests to contain the U.S. unilateralism, and this is one of the important factors in determining the future of the Middle East. There is a ripe opportunity here, as the Trump administration's unilateralist policy and its withdrawal from international treaties (including but not limited to the JCPOA) have all seriously called into question the legitimacy and the credibility of the United States [as a world power](#). Many countries around the world are now considering China as the future successor to the United States in world leadership. For example, even amid souring China-Europe ties, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the European Union has a “great strategic interest” in maintaining cooperation with [China](#). “We Europeans will need to recognize the decisiveness with which China will claim a leading position in the existing structures of the international architecture,” Merkel said.

Amid all these considerations, steps continue toward Tehran-Beijing-Moscow alignment. Russia and China [rejected](#) the U.S. attempt to extend a U.N. arms embargo on Iran that is set to expire later in October 2020 according to the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal. While it's [unclear](#) to what extent Russia and China will work to boost the Iranian military, Tehran remains the only option for Moscow and Beijing to balance their arms sales in the region with the West's. The United States is the top [arms supplier](#) to 13 of the 19 countries of the Middle East, supplying nearly half of the region's arms; Europe follows with over 20 percent while Russia and China's share combined is about 20 percent.

In short, the United States' coercive policies on Iran, Russia, and China will remain the main obstacle for the trilateral strategic alliance. However, the destiny of such a strategic agreement will be an important consideration in future international relations. Iran possesses the world's second largest natural gas reserves and the fourth largest oil reserves, which position it as a significant weight in the strategic calculations that the Eurasian powers make in their foreign policy toward the [Middle East](#). By strategic engagement with Iran, Beijing and Moscow would have a unique opportunity to reorient both Iran and its regional rivals toward the China-Russia Eurasian architecture.

Ambassador [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) is Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy

Specialist at Princeton University, Associate Professor at the University of Kashan, and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. His book "Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace" was released in May 2014. His latest book, "A Middle East Free of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A New Approach to Nonproliferation," was published by Routledge in April 2020.

TAGS

Flashpoints Diplomacy Central Asia Iran

China-Iran energy trade China-Iran relations

China-Iran strategic partnership China-Iran-Russia axis

Iran-Russia relations