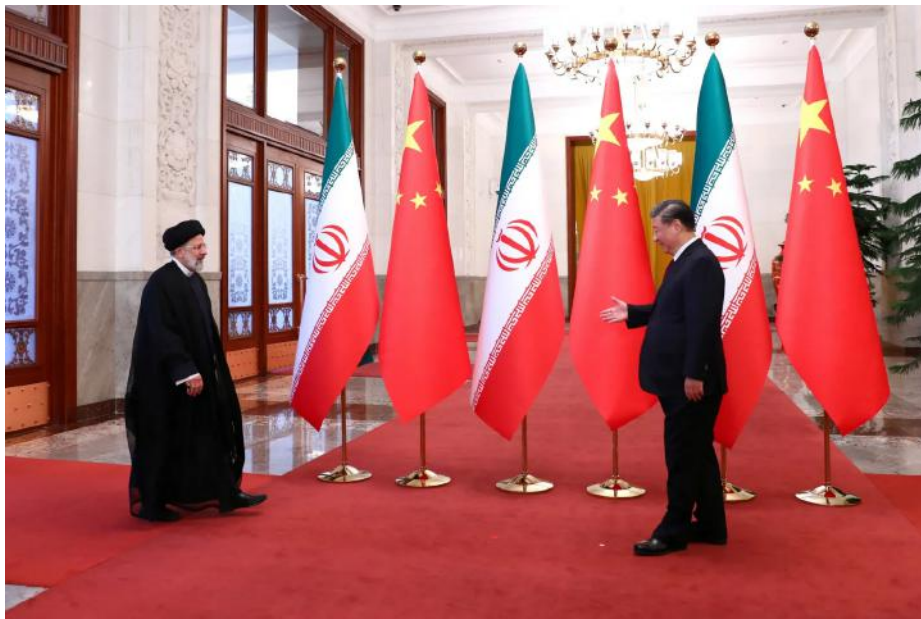


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Iran's New Patrons

Why China and Russia Are Stepping Up Their Support

By Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh September 7, 2023



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, February 2023
Iran's President Website / West Asia News Agency / Reuters

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Upon assuming power in 1979, Iran's revolutionaries prided themselves on rejecting the global order. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country's first supreme leader, declared that his state would be "neither East nor West." Khomeini viewed the United States as "the Great Satan"—the preeminent, spiritually corrupting imperial power that supported Westernizing despots in the Muslim world. But in his eyes, godless communism and the Soviet Union were just as baleful. "My dear friends, you should know that the danger from communist powers is not less than America," he said in 1980.

By rejecting partners, the Islamic Republic showed it would not be an ordinary country that sought to maximize its advantages by forging alliances. Instead, the revolutionary regime saw itself as a

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toward freedom and justice. After Iranian soldiers ejected the Iraqi army from Iranian territory in 1982, the Islamic Republic's war against Iraq became a liberation movement aimed at freeing Muslims all the way to the Mediterranean. The government plotted to overthrow other neighboring governments as well and sponsored a variety of Islamic terrorist organizations across the Middle East. In fact, the clerical leadership responded sympathetically to anti-American left-wing secular radicals wherever it encountered them.

But as Tehran quickly discovered, going it alone was not an effective strategy. The country's zeal for exporting revolution put it at odds with most of the world, and especially with states in its region. Indeed, the Islamic Republic's revolutionary attitude and doggedness in the Iran-Iraq War hardened sectarian sentiments in the Middle East. Iran sold its oil, but it never became a destination for global commerce. By the time of his death, in 1989, Khomeini had achieved none of his foreign objectives.

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Khomeini's successors were bound to take stock of their revolution. And upon assuming office, the country's new supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, tentatively started to reach out. Tehran maintained its hostility toward the United States, always the central target of its rage, but scaled back its commitment to further revolution in Muslim lands. It spent less time railing against countries outside the West and began looking for great-power patrons.

At first, it struggled to find them. Iran began hunting for partners at an inopportune moment: right after the end of the Cold War, when American power was largely uncontested. The Europeans were always willing to trade with Iran, but their investments, even in the oil sector, were made with hesitation. China and Russia were more eager to conduct commerce with Iran, but they did not yet share Tehran's hostility to Washington. In fact, Beijing and Moscow were wary of antagonizing the United States at the height of its post-Cold War power.

Over the last 15 years, however, that has changed. As Washington's power and influence have declined, Beijing and Moscow have decided that they can challenge the liberal international order. They have routinely welcomed Iranian officials and offered Tehran more extensive economic and military support. Even though this aid comes with strings, Tehran has benefited greatly. China provides Iran with U.S. sanctions-resistant trade and easier access to advanced technology. As a result, the clerical regime no longer fears economic collapse. Russia, meanwhile, has helped to modernize Iran's military.

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revisionist axis, effectively ending the Islamic Republic's isolation. Buttressed by these new allies, the Iranian theocracy can, whenever it chooses, press ahead with building a nuclear bomb. And thanks to their support, the Tehran government is feeling more powerful and more secure than it ever has.

LONE WOLF

When Iran first tried opening up in the 1990s under the administration of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the country struggled. The supposedly technocratic revolutionaries behind the clerics had difficulty creating a more coherent economy with a modern infrastructure. They were not big fans of the rule of law, uniform tax policies, or honest bookkeeping—three of the main prerequisites for sustained economic development. They would not touch the Islamic Republic's vast spoils system, in which familial, clerical, and Revolutionary Guard networks are the decisive economic force. Corruption, sometimes carried out through violent means, was and remains endemic.

That said, Iran did find some opportunities abroad before the current millennium. To feed its growing energy needs, China began purchasing sizable quantities of Iranian oil. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was in dire economic straits, so it developed a lucrative commercial relationship by selling weapons to Tehran. In exchange, the Islamic Republic ignored Russia's slaughter of Muslim rebels in Chechnya. Realizing that it had little traction in the Persian-speaking Sunni regions of Central Asia and not wanting to offend Moscow, Tehran didn't press its religious mission in Russia's backyard.

But neither China nor Russia was willing to forge a serious partnership with the Islamic Republic. China, intensely focused on its own economic development, needed access to the U.S. market and American technology. It had no interest in allying itself with one of Washington's main antagonists. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and, initially, Vladimir Putin, his successor, were also interested in dialogue and trade with the United States as they sought to integrate Russia into the global economy. Although he certainly desired one, Khamenei could not construct a Eurasian alliance against Washington.

Iran began hunting for partners at an inopportune moment.

Isolated and largely alone in the early 1990s, Rafsanjani and Khamenei amped up the country's clandestine nuclear weapons

War. Both men also blessed illicit weapons trading with North Korea. (In his diaries, published in 2014, Rafsanjani bragged about how Iranian ships carrying “sensitive material” from North Korea in 1992 had escaped U.S. naval surveillance.) In 2002, when a dissident group revealed that the Islamic Republic had a relatively elaborate atomic program, the Europeans responded with diplomacy while the U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions against the mullahs. The United States, occupied with the war in Afghanistan and the coming invasion of Iraq—which was in part justified by fear of Saddam Hussein’s quest for weapons of mass destruction—went along with the European Union’s diplomatic track.

Hassan Rouhani, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator with Europe from 2003 to 2005 and later the country’s president, described these years as ones of extraordinary unease. In his memoirs, published in 2012, Rouhani stressed that “no one thought Saddam’s regime would collapse in three weeks.” He went on: “Our military leaders had told us that Saddam would not be defeated soon and it would take America at least six months to a year to reach his palace.” In a 2005 speech to Iran’s Expediency Council and national security council staffs, Rouhani called George W. Bush a “drunken Abyssinian”—the Persian equivalent of a “mad cowboy.” In the regime’s view, the United States, an angry colossus, now stalked the Middle East. Tehran responded cautiously, declining to confront Washington in Iraq.

The United States imposed a web of sanctions that, combined with an impoverishing socialist economy, severely limited Iran’s capacity to attract foreign investment, trade, and hard currency. The resulting nuclear crisis was a turning point: to blunt U.S. pressure, the country realized it needed Chinese and Russian support.

Early on, however, neither great power offered much. In 2003, when Rouhani journeyed to both Beijing and Moscow asking for help, he was rebuffed. Referring to Washington and its allies, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing told Rouhani, “Don’t anticipate that we will stand against them.” In Moscow, Putin was even more direct. “We will not stand against the world on your behalf,” he said in a meeting with Rouhani. “We are neighbors, but we will not endanger our own national interests.” During Bush’s second term and U.S. President Barack Obama’s first, Washington used its upper hand to persuade China to reduce its purchases of Iranian oil and Russia to restrict its arms sales to Tehran.

BLOOD BROTHERS

Throughout the first decade of the millennium, Iran continued to languish in isolation. But as the 2010s began, international events started to break in its favor. The insurgency in Iraq fueled and

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East. Growing antiwar sentiment in the United States helped Obama win the presidency. Seeking to establish a new beginning with the Muslim world, and seemingly convinced that long-standing problems with Iran could be overcome through his personal intervention, Obama opened his diplomacy with Khamenei by accepting Iran's most consequential nuclear gains.

The eventual 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, not only greenlighted the Islamic Republic's indigenous uranium enrichment but also stipulated that after 15 years, the regime would be free to develop industrial-scale enrichment. At a time when Iran's economy was in distress, the nuclear deal both filled the country's coffers and legitimized its atomic aspirations. Following the faulty logic that led to massive Western investment in Communist China and post-Soviet Russia, the agreement assumed that if Iran were free to trade, it would turn it into a less threatening, less ideological state.

U.S. policies weren't the only thing that emboldened Tehran. The Arab Spring of 2011, which came after Iran's massive pro-democracy Green Movement and upended governments across the Middle East and North Africa, also gave the clerical regime an advantage. Although most states don't like being surrounded by turmoil, Iran thrives in regional chaos, and it capitalized on the Arab Spring's instability to extend its reach. The regime has long relied on oppressed, radicalized Shiite minorities and both Shiite and Sunni militias to exert authority. Through these proxies, the mullahs became the kingmakers of Iraq's factious politics. No Iraqi prime minister could assume power and no parliament could convene without Tehran's consent. Iran sent the Revolutionary Guards to Syria along with a separate militia force of approximately 70,000 men to help crush the Arab Spring's Sunni rebellion against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Already inclined to listen to Tehran, Damascus has now become thoroughly beholden. In neighboring Lebanon, Hezbollah, an Iranian-created paramilitary organization, came to dominate the government. And in Yemen, the Tehran-backed Shiite Houthis have now defeated forces supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in that country's most recent civil war.

Beijing has taken much of the sting out of U.S. sanctions.

These regional victories did not relieve Iran's economic distress. But its economic salvation may be around the corner. Over the past few years, China has created its own sphere of influence. Beijing has been especially committed to gaining privileged access to the resources of the global South and has made Iran, with its large

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2021, China and the Islamic Republic signed a 25-year agreement that allows the Chinese to penetrate nearly all sectors of Iran's economy. Beijing plans to invest in Iran's infrastructure and telecommunications, and it has promised to help develop the Islamic Republic's energy sector and supposedly civilian nuclear industry.

For the clerical regime, these deals are already yielding tangible economic and security benefits. Iran is now selling 359,000 barrels of oil a year to China. Its GDP, which was cut in half between 2017 and 2020, is growing. In February 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping assured Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi that Beijing "supports Iran in safeguarding national sovereignty" and backed its efforts at "resisting unilateralism and bullying." The Islamic Republic is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and in August, Iran was invited to join the BRICS, a bloc of large developing economies. Successive U.S. administrations have hoped that financial and diplomatic pressure would force the theocracy to cede its nuclear assets, but China's actions have made such a scenario inconceivable. Beijing has taken much of the sting out of U.S. sanctions.

Russia is also doing its part to help Tehran. In the first ten months of 2022, Russian exports to Iran rose by 27 percent. The two countries have signed a memorandum of understanding that commits Moscow to investing \$40 billion in Iranian gas projects. It is easy to see why Russia is lending a hand. Its invasion of Ukraine has left it isolated from many of its traditional partners, but Iran has clearly, surely, and irreversibly sided with Russia. "The United States started this war in Ukraine in order to expand NATO toward the East," Khamenei said in March, bolstering Putin's narrative about the conflict. Iran has sold large quantities of drones to Russia. In exchange, Moscow has opened its armory, providing Iran with air defense systems, helicopters, and, soon, advanced aircraft such as the Sukhoi Su-35.

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS

For Tehran, having powerful new partners is not all good news. With great-power patronage come restraints and obligations, and the Islamic Republic has had to make concessions that it surely detests. Its deal with China gives Beijing substantial sway over Iran's economy, to the point that it resembles the capitulation agreements that Europe once imposed on Persian monarchs. For Tehran, this is deeply ironic. The clerical regime likes to argue that its revolution reclaimed Iran's independence, but the mullahs have now given a new foreign power several keys to their realm.

China has already begun to use its authority. Beijing wants stability

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investments in Saudi Arabia. Iran, by contrast, likes to disrupt oil traffic in the Gulf in order to inflict pain on its Arab rivals. In 2019, for instance, Tehran attacked Saudi Aramco oil-processing facilities with drones and cruise missiles, temporarily reducing Saudi oil production by half and driving up global oil prices by 20 percent. But China appears to have obliged Iran to reduce tensions with the Saudis, corralling them into renewing relations in a March deal among the three countries. The Islamic Republic may still occasionally damage a tanker in an attempt to intimidate Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but there is likely now a cap on how much pain it can inflict on its Gulf neighbors.

Such constraints are not the only reason Tehran probably resents renewed ties with Riyadh. The Islamic Republic's rulers have long depicted the House of Saud as an agent of U.S. imperialism and an illegitimate regime that uses a reactionary interpretation of Islam to hold onto power. They detest Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's vicious anti-Shiite campaign inside his country. They blame Riyadh for inflaming the "women, life, and freedom" protests that shook Iran in 2022. And among the March accord's three signatories, Iran clearly gained the least. China demonstrated its diplomatic skill and made itself into a Middle East power while the Saudi crown prince, known as MBS, obtained a path out of his failed intervention in Yemen and, most important, gained hope that the Islamic Republic—with its vast and growing arsenal of missiles and drones— would not bombard the gargantuan projects in his Saudi Vision 2030 development plan, on which the future of his rule rests. The only tangible benefit Iran obtained was China's gratitude.

China could welcome an atomic Iran.

Russia has imposed an even greater burden on Iran. The Islamic Republic may not like Europe, but it does not want to make the continent into a sworn enemy the way it has the United States. Yet by providing Putin with lethal military support, Iran has indirectly gone to war with NATO. Its drones and munitions are killing Ukrainians, making it tough for even the most dogged European apologists of Iran to justify dealing with the regime. Iran's support for Russia is also draining its military stockpiles for a war that ultimately has little bearing on its core interests. Ukraine is not part of Iran's neighborhood; there are no revolutionary Islamist aspirations at risk in Eastern Europe.

But whatever headaches the Islamic Republic may face from having patrons, they pale in comparison with the damage those partnerships do to Western interests, especially when it comes to Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. U.S. and European leaders long

differences with China and Russia, neither country wanted Iran to have the bomb. But that may no longer be true. Unlike the United States, Russia has lived for decades with nuclear-armed states on its periphery. Putin might be perfectly comfortable with another country in the mix. In fact, it is not hard to envision Russia sharing nuclear technologies and expertise with Iran. Iran's crossing of the nuclear threshold would make a mockery of numerous pledges, made by both Democrats and Republicans, that Washington will never allow it to get the bomb. Putin would therefore gain from helping his Persian ally humiliate the United States and degrade Washington's position in the Middle East.

Xi could prove equally welcoming to an atomic Iran. China's president also cares little about international conventions, so he may not be perturbed by more nuclear proliferation. He did not object to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, after all, and he has not respected India's territorial sovereignty in the Himalayas or the Pacific Island states' historical claims in the South China Sea. Xi might also reasonably conclude that an Iranian bomb would expedite the United States' exit from the Middle East. Indeed, with the American political class united in bemoaning "forever wars," the specter of a nuclear Iran could offer a good reason to further lessen its footprint in the region. For Beijing, always aiming at Taiwan, the global consequences of a nuclear Iran are mostly beneficial.

Once Iran assembles the bomb, of course, its relations with its great-power allies are likely to change. No longer a junior partner, it may become bolder. A nuclear Iran might return to striking Gulf oil infrastructure, for example. It might share new and better missile technology with its allied militias, which could decide to act more independently and more aggressively. These hypotheticals, of course, have not yet encouraged China and Russia to reconsider their approach to the mullahs.

IRAN'S AMERICAN HUSTLE

When it comes to Iran, U.S. President Joe Biden should be unhappy with the position he finds himself in. He came into office oblivious to how the Islamic Republic's burgeoning partnerships and the broader geopolitical landscape had brought the era of arms control to an end. He initially spoke of forging a "longer and stronger" deal with Tehran before settling for desultory "proximity talks" in which U.S. negotiators agreed to never meet their Iranian counterparts. He tried to tempt the clerical regime by offering trade concessions and ignoring the International Atomic Energy Agency's questions about the regime's untoward activities, much as Obama did in 2015 to get the original nuclear accord. Biden should not have been surprised when the clerical regime responded the same way it did to Obama:

to make a crude atomic weapon. In January, the IAEA detected an enrichment level exceeding 80 percent.

Today, the mood in the Islamic Republic, compared with just a year ago, is triumphant. Khamenei's republic has survived sanctions and internal protests. With the help of its great-power allies, it has steadied its economy and started to replenish its defenses. A nuclear bomb is within reach. When the supreme leader decides to cross that threshold, there is little reason to believe that Israel or the United States intends to stop him with force.

Khamenei, then, will have done what Khomeini failed to do. He will have ensured the survival of the revolution against its primary enemy, the United States. He will have turned the Middle East into a region where Iran, after 44 years of trying, is the dominant power.



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