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**Role Theory and China's Relations with Iran:  
All-weather Friends on Beijing's Terms**

PhD Thesis

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School of Government and International Affairs

Durham University

Ustinov College

Supervisor: Professor Anoush Ehteshami

August 2022

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of others which is used in the thesis is credited to the author in question in the text.

## **Abstract**

The present thesis investigates the *role* that China has developed, taken, and enacted in its relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this work, the term “role” has a precise connotation that refers to the conceptualisation of international roles as defined and investigated by the so-called Role Theory of International Relations. In that context, this study has the modest theoretical objective of developing a two-dimensional interactionist model that identifies two fundamental dimensions – one structural and one ideational – constitutive of international roles. These two dimensions, by interacting together, also assure the performance and resilience of roles. In the case of China’s *role* in the partnership with Iran, the structural dimension is defined by the middle power-great power framework, which describes a (highly) asymmetrical relationship within which material and strategic interests are conceived and pursued. Vice versa, the ideational dimension is constituted by those identity concepts, historical references, and mutually understandable ideas that Chinese policymakers employ when interacting with their Iranian counterparts, which form altogether what can be described as a non-Western friendship. The interaction of these two dimensions defines the role that China has taken and enacted in its relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The thesis presents it as that of the *friendly stakeholder*. As with every international role, the *friendly stakeholder* role has its dynamicity. In fact, it is subject to intra-role conflicts caused by Iran’s contestation or China’s underperformance. At the same time, the competition and confrontation with China’s other international roles cause role conflicts. Therefore, to understand how China has taken and enacted this role and managed the related conflicts, this study adopts a historical perspective on China-Iran relations, considering a timeframe from 1979 to 2015. Within these temporal boundaries, the thesis explores China’s role-taking and role performance in the relationship with Iran through four historical episodes: the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the Iraq-Iran War, China’s partial disengagement from cooperating with Iran in 1997, and the negotiations that led to the approval of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran Deal, in 2015. Each historical episode is located within the broader history of China’s foreign relations, emphasising the relationship with the United States as the most significant external intervening variable in China’s relationship with Iran. Ultimately, the objective of the thesis is threefold. Firstly, presenting the abovementioned theoretical model for the

definition of international roles. Secondly, providing an original framework for understanding the bilateral dimension of Sino-Iranian relations. Lastly, helping to critically locate Iran within China's Persian Gulf strategy, its relationship with the United States, and its rise as great power.

## **Acknowledgement**

The journey that brought me from my first steps in Durham in October 2018 to submitting this thesis in August 2022 could not have been possible without my supervisor's unrivalled academic and human support. Professor Anoush Ehteshami has been a mentor, a friend, a colleague, and a constant source of intellectual inspiration. I and this study owe him the most significant debt. For everything good that has come out of the past four years, Professor Ehteshami should be praised. Of course, I am the only one responsible for every mistake, inaccuracy, and shortcoming in this work.

Pursuing this study would not have been possible without the generous support of the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme. In the past four years, I have taken the greatest pride in introducing myself as an al-Sabah doctoral fellow. Therefore, I hope this study, as much as all the works I have published in the past, will honour the name of the Programme.

Among the extraordinary people I have met along this journey, to whom I owe my deepest gratitude, Professor Emma Murphy will always retain a special place in my heart for her kindness, generosity, care, and parental love. Professor Clive Jones faced the burden of examining me twice during the PhD. His suggestion and constructive criticism have been a push and inspiration to improve this study. I owe him an intellectual debt that is second only to the one I owe to my supervisor. I am thankful to all the PhD community at the School of Government and International Affairs – a group of friends and extraordinary colleagues who helped make my PhD journey an unforgettable experience.

I am lucky to have a few loyal friends who have accompanied me from a distance along this journey. They have an irreplaceable place in my heart. We will raise our glasses soon, amici.

I have learned a lot during this journey, except how to communicate how much gratitude and respect I owe to my family. So, please, forgive my silence once again. I could not have been here without your unconditional encouragement, love, and generosity. Grazie.

After all, this thesis is not the most important achievement of this PhD journey. In fact, it pales compared to what I found on a Winter evening while returning to Durham: The love of my life. This thesis is dedicated to you, Ludovica.

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## Introduction

In early 2017, while still a master's student at SOAS, I began my journey into China's relations with the Middle East. The trigger was no less than pure curiosity. I distinctively recall several fascinating discussions on China-Africa relations, which, with the natural bias of every student of the Middle East, prompted a (naïve) question: If everyone is talking about Beijing's growing footprint on the African continent, why is no one interested in China-MENA relations? After all, the Middle East is the most fascinating, politically alive region of the world! My astonishment was unjustified. In fact, I quickly found a significant body of literature and a small-yet-well-rooted community of scholars worldwide working on this topic. My curiosity grew exponentially when I came across John Garver's book on Sino-Iranian relations. By the summer of 2017, I was working on my master's dissertation researching Iran's foreign policy as one of the manifestations of the Islamic Republic's archetypal idea of perpetual resistance. At that point, encountering Garver's book was a second epiphany: I decided that I had to prepare a PhD proposal on China-Iran relations, a topic I felt was both overlooked – again, except Garver's work and few significant others – as much as it was fascinating. Five years later, I hope this thesis represents a modest yet thought-provoking contribution to the topic that fascinated me so much to push me to dedicate a significant chunk of my energy, passion, time, and commitment.

China's relations with Iran are highly complex and multi-level, reflecting the encounter between two countries that, for different reasons, are profoundly involved in the regional and global political, security, and economic dynamics. Since Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran in January 2016 – conveniently happened a week after the implementation day of the JCPOA – Sino-Iranian relations have gained prominence in world news, attracting the attention of both general and specialised audiences. The reasons are apparent. Iran and the United States are historically locked in an enduring enmity that, except for the JCPOA, has rarely improved into an even minimum degree of cooperation. When Donald Trump decided to withdraw the United States from the Iran Deal, reimposing US secondary sanctions in 2018, Washington-Tehran relations reached a new low. Contextually, the Obama and

Trump administrations progressively re-centered the US foreign policy toward the great power competition with China. In that context, the idea that two of Washington's rivals were re-launching and expanding their partnership was the perfect storm. The result was a proliferation of analyses and a pick of anxiety among Western analysts, lobbyists, and policymakers that often missed the nuances and limits of Sino-Iranian relations. Part of the rationale behind the urgency to write this thesis can be traced to the need to provide a more balanced, less sensationalistic account of this partnership, offering a tool – the description of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran – that could be used to frame and read the current and future developments in China-Iran relations.

The idea that a specific label – the *friendly stakeholder role* – can be a valuable and novel tool to frame the Sino-Iranian partnership reflects a particular gap in the literature on this topic. Most academic analyses and think tank reports published in the past four decades have mostly been descriptive, alternatively focusing on the broader delineation of the reasons and areas of cooperation between Beijing and Tehran or specific components of the partnership (e.g., arms sales, energy relations, etc.). A relevant exception to this trend is the already cited book by John Garver, “China & Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post Imperial World.”<sup>1</sup> Although provides one of the most authoritative and comprehensive accounts of the historical cooperation between the PRC and the IRI, Garver does not renounce identifying the spirit that sustains Sino-Iranian relations. In doing so, he offers a valuable map that warns the reader – and the researcher who, if interested in studying this partnership, has to refer to Garver's work necessarily – of the deep baggage of historical references, ideational convergences, shared narratives, and political tensions that constitute an inseparable component of Sino-Iranian relations. To a certain extent, this thesis aims to be in continuity with Garver's work – while also owing him an outstanding debt for the unchallenged number of primary sources, insights, and reflections – and his brilliant definition of “civilisational solidarity” as the ideational core of the China-Iran partnership. Indeed, the urgency to define China's *role* is derived from the challenge of formalising the compresence

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006)

and interaction of structural boundaries, material and strategic interests, and ideational factors at the partnership's core.

Yet, the direct and indirect impact the United States has on this partnership becomes immediately apparent when researching Sino-Iranian relations. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this thesis is to formalise how China's relations with the US effectively interact with the PRC's *role* in the relations with the IRI, understanding Washington's influence both as an external intervening variable in the definition of the *role* itself and as a source of inter-role conflicts. Similarly, the study of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations necessarily considers its location within the PRC's strategy in the Persian Gulf and Beijing's broader approach toward the non-Western, developing world. In other words, one of the vantage points offered by the study of international roles is the need to conjugate the bilateral dynamics of the partnership in object with the larger foreign policy context in which the actor that enacts the role is embedded. Ultimately, this thesis aims to situate Sino-Iranian relations in the broader perimeter of China's foreign relations. This objective assumes an overarching value given Iran's preponderant influence on the Persian Gulf security and the peculiar entanglement between Tehran, Beijing, and Washington.

At this point, it should be apparent the value I attach to the Role Theory of International Relations as a theoretical approach able to reconcile the structural boundaries set by the distribution of power and the interest-driven policymaking with the narratives, images, and ideas that constitute the ideational backbone of inter-state relations. Therefore, as a middle-ground approach, Role Theory does not neglect the value of the broader Realist tradition nor that of the post-structuralist ones. Vice versa, it offers a robust, modern synthesis to which I attach significant theoretical and explanatory value.

### **Research questions**

Three main research questions have guided the research that led to the writing of this thesis:

1. What *role* has the People's Republic of China taken and enacted in the relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran?

2. What structural, material and ideational components shape the PRC's *role* in the relations with the IRI?
3. Which intra-role and inter-role conflicts does China face in its relations with Iran, and how does Beijing manage them?

Each question is intimately bound to the theoretical approach I decided to adopt in this thesis, the so-called Role Theory of International Relations, and thus reflects the overarching objective of this research: defining Beijing's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations.

### **Methodology and research design**

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach. As put by Cameron Thies, qualitative research is often performed when “the concepts to be studied are more amenable to labelling by words rather than numbers.”<sup>2</sup> As banal as it sounds, this is the most straightforward justification for using qualitative methods in this thesis. This is a comprehensive study of Sino-Iranian relations that ultimately is found upon a birds-eye observation of four decades of multifaced interaction between the two countries and the surrounding political, strategic, security, economic, and geopolitical environment. Numbers can hardly be satisfactory labels for such a study. Or in other words, this study is qualitative because it benefits from a “method that brings out more detail and nuance from a case than can be found by reducing it to quantitative measures.”<sup>3</sup> While there is a tendency to prefer quantitative methodologies, especially in the US academia, I still believe that qualitative research has its unreplaceable value in studying human and social phenomena. Furthermore, the research design I defined for this thesis and the main research questions that guided this study seemed particularly suitable for a valuable qualitative approach. In particular, the reconstruction of the two components of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations is made through the observation of historical

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<sup>2</sup> Cameron G. Thies, ‘A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations,’ *International Studies Perspective*, 3:4 (2002), p. 352

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Barkin, ‘Qualitative Methods?’ in Audie Klotz and Deppa Prakash (Eds.), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.211

empirical trends in the case of the structural component (e.g., the relative and absolute distribution of power to define the power status of China and Iran and the trends in their economic and military exchanges), and, in the case of the ideational component, through a reconstruction of the corresponding ideas and concepts in Chinese and Iranian national identity and foreign policy projection. Arguably, this analysis could have been performed through a quantitative methodology (e.g., performing some text analyses and then statistically confronting the recurrency of specific words in the speeches of Chinese and Iranian leaders). Yet, I do not believe that the conclusion would have diverged significantly from what I found in this study. I will certainly be more than happy to see this challenged by other researchers in the future.

Chapter 5 presents the empirical study of China's role-taking and role-enactment in Sino-Iranian relations using a case study approach. The case study design is intimately connected with the qualitative framework adopted in this thesis. I attach extraordinary value to the virtue of the case study design to 'cover the contextual conditions' of the analysed phenomenon,<sup>4</sup> offering the chance to factor into the analysis the macrocosm of external intervening variables – often not intuitively related to the microcosm of Sino-Iranian relations but contextual to the identity formation and expression, behaviour, and objectives of the involved actors. As described in the next section, the case studies adopted are in the form of historical episodes. Alexander George and Andrew Bennet have described the case study as 'the detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalisable to other events.'<sup>5</sup> Following that definition, the historical episodes presented in Chapter 5 serves to empirically test the notion that China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations can be described as that of a *friendly stakeholder*, demonstrating that, historically, the main features of the *role*, its tenets, prescriptions, and inherent contradictions have emerged in the conduct of Sino-Iranian relations at particularly relevant historical junctures. Therefore, another virtue of the case study approach is the possibility of using it to draw

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003): 13.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander B. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), p.5

‘implicit comparisons’ between a small (or even larger) number of cases.<sup>6</sup> Such implicit comparison is at the core of Chapter 5, where the historical episodes presented are not only organised along the historical continuum of Sino-Iranian relations, but the explicit ambition of capturing the evolution of China’s role in the partnership with Iran is a natural source of comparison between the case studies. Unsurprisingly, due to its ‘almost unprecedented popularity and vitality’ in the broader field of international studies,<sup>7</sup> the case study approach has attracted criticism and pushback. Lack of academic and methodological rigour has been imputed to this methodology.<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have denounced the problem of generalisation about the explanatory and theory-generative value of case studies.<sup>9</sup> In particular, I attach great importance to the question of case selection, embracing the argument that a strategic and well-designed selection of cases can significantly increase the generalisability of conclusions, strengthening the value of the case study methodology against quantitative approaches that rely on representative and random samples.<sup>10</sup>

### **Historical episodes as case studies**

The empirical analysis of China’s role-taking and role enactment in Sino-Iranian relations is made through the study of historical episodes. Malici and Walker define them as ‘time windows in which the interactions between states are so fundamental that they have the potential to (re)define the ensuing and evolving role relationships.’<sup>11</sup> Therefore, historical episodes work as case studies. Similarly to Malici and Walker's work, which included a limited number of crucial historical

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Bennett, ‘Case study methods: Design, use, and comparative advantages,’ in Detlef Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (Eds.), *Models, numbers, and cases: Methods for studying international relations*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2004), p.20

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, ‘Case Study Methods,’ in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

<sup>8</sup> See Zeev Maoz, ‘Case Study Methodology in International Studies: From Storytelling to Hypothesis Testing,’ in Frank P. Harvey and Michael Brecher (Eds.), *Evaluating Methodology in International Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), pp.164-5; and Yin, *Case Study Research*, p.10

<sup>9</sup> Ben Willis, The Advantages and Limitations of Single Case Study Analysis, *e-IR*, 5 July 2014. <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/07/05/the-advantages-and-limitations-of-single-case-study-analysis/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Akan Malici, Stephen G. Walker, *Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p.4

episodes directly involving Iran and the United States, the thesis considers four significant events between the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The main criteria that guided the selection of the historical episodes are the following:

- Be the direct cause or a significant consequence of a change or substantial adjustment in China and Iran's foreign policy identity/national role conception.
- Be the direct cause or a significant consequence of a change or substantial adjustment in the policies adopted by China vis-à-vis Iran.
- Be the direct cause or a significant consequence of a change or substantial adjustment in the narratives/discourse adopted by China vis-à-vis Iran.
- Represent a significant global event that involves or impacts either China, Iran or the triads that intervene in their relationship.

Therefore, historical episodes are the critical empirical indicator of China's role-taking and role-enactment in Sino-Iranian relations. Also, being located and analysed along a historical trajectory, they allow studying the evolution of Beijing's *role* in its partnership with Iran, spotting the emergence of intra-role and inter-role conflicts and subsequently detecting how the PRC has managed them. The four historical episodes analysed are the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the Iraq-Iran War, China's partial disengagement from cooperating with Iran in 1997, and the negotiations that led to the approval of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran Deal, in 2015.

### **Data collection**

This study relies, for the most part, on secondary sources collected through in-depth research, review, and systematisation of academic and policy-oriented literature.



Publicly available primary sources such as newspaper articles, government reports, collections of official speeches of relevant political figures, and other documents have been equally precious data sources for this thesis. Unfortunately, the language barrier and the political practices of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China posed concrete limits to exploring archival documents and conducting fieldwork and interviews in the respective countries. From the months before I began my PhD journey at Durham University until early 2020, the dream of spending time in Iran researching Sino-Iranian relations was still alive. Then, in February 2020, the scary news that the Sars-CoV-2 virus was found in Iran – the first country in the Middle East to be hit by the Covid-19 pandemic – wiped out any hope of visiting the country and conducting research there.

Luckily enough, despite remaining a niche, Sino-Iranian relations have been the subject of several scholarly works – starting from the monumental scholarship of John W. Garver – that have been the foundation and the primary data source for this thesis. Equally, many works have comprehensively investigated Chinese and Iranian foreign policies, ranging from comprehensive studies of their fundamental principles, practices, leadership figures, and histories to detailed accounts of specific ramifications and niches of their external projection. Therefore, the main task I faced while collecting data for this study was their selection. I did it by performing comprehensive literature reviews on four macro-areas: (1) The state of the art of scholarly and policy works on Sino-Iranian relations; (2) The IRI's foreign policy principles and objectives; (3) The PRC's foreign policy principles and objectives with a specific focus on Sino-Persian Gulf relations and Sino-US relations; (4) The Role Theory of International Relations. I chose not to present these literature reviews as self-standing sections of the thesis. Instead, the most relevant data collected from the literature reviews are integrated into each chapter. This choice mainly reflects matters of style – sacrificing some accessibility to the sources in favour of what I consider more elegance. The literature reviews also served as the starting point for engaging some specific primary sources, such as the speeches of Deng Xiaoping and the works published by Chinese officials in celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that are mentioned in Chapter 3.

## **Thesis structure**

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework adopted to study China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations. After reviewing the historical and current research on the Role Theory of International Relations, in the first Chapter, I present the theoretical model I developed – the two-dimensional interactionist model – that constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of this thesis. Following the two-dimensional interactionist model, Chapter 2 presents the structural dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations, presenting how structural and material elements define the semi-rigid boundaries of Beijing's role-taking and role-enactment, highlighting the peculiar triple asymmetry of Sino-Iranian relations. In other words, this Chapter describes the “stakeholder” component of the *role*. Consequently, Chapter 3 explores the ideational dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations, presenting what is *on the shelves* of the PRC and the IRI when they interact. This dimension is particularly relevant in the model because it is the most plastic component of the *role* and thus compensates for the rigidity of the structural dimension. Therefore, Chapter 4 describes the *role* that emerges from studying the structural and ideational components of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations. The *friendly stakeholder role* encapsulates the ever-present tension between the two components, locating the *friendly stakeholder role* within the other international roles performed by China and described by the related literature. Finally, Chapter 5 looks at the *responsible stakeholder role* “in action”. The four historical episodes studied in the Chapter offer an empirical observation of the genesis and performance of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations. Particular emphasis is given to Beijing's management of role conflicts. The thesis' conclusions briefly look at a fifth historical episode before highlighting the main findings, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## **Why study Sino-Iranian relations? Thesis objectives and relevance**

At this point, my passion and fascination for the topic of this thesis should already be apparent. But is this enough to justify the research effort, time, funding, and academic relevance of pursuing a PhD on Sino-Iranian relations? The answer is undoubtedly no. Yet, several reasons make this study relevant well beyond my fascination. China and Iran established official diplomatic ties in 1971, but the encounter between the imperial ancestors of the current polities dates back

centuries. Yet, contemporary Sino-Iranian relations are often misunderstood, simplified, and politically characterised uniquely in the frameworks of China-US-Iran relations. Nonetheless, Sino-Iranian relations have their own dignity, facets, self-standing significance, and external implications that make this partnership particularly worthy of rigorous and adjourned scholarly attention.

Studying China-Iran relations is also highly relevant from regional and global perspectives. At the regional level, as highlighted in the thesis, Sino-Iranian relations represent a pillar of Beijing's engagement with the Persian Gulf sub-region, making their study a necessary stepping stone to develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical, contemporary, and future trajectory of this set of relationships. Then, Sino-Iranian relations have the extraordinary virtue of containing a microcosm of political, diplomatic, economic, military, and human interactions that is an almost perfect snapshot of the macrocosm of China's relations with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. In other words, by taking an in-depth look at the dynamics that govern China's engagement with Iran, it is possible to collect evidence and hints that speak of the broader picture of Beijing's historical, contemporary, and future trajectory in this region. For instance, the prolonged and pervasive use of civilisational rhetoric – and, more broadly, the resort to the definition of an ideational common ground – in Sino-Iranian relations offer a critical explanation of the tools that China implies to sustain its international roles when the predominant economic dimension of its partnership diplomacy faces crises. In other words, this study has the potential to be the base of a comparative exercise that will enrich our understanding of the PRC's relations with different sets of countries within and beyond the MENA region: the Persian Gulf states, the Global South, the BRI partners, and those countries that are at odds with the United States.

On the global level, Sino-Iranian relations are significant because they are embedded in China's emergence and consolidation as a great power. The PRC emerged on the global stage thirty years before the IRI. Yet, while post-Revolutionary Iran has faced a tormented history, Communist China appeared to be on a seemingly unstoppable development path to gain international relevance. From becoming a nuclear-armed state in 1964 to obtaining a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council in 1971, from opening up and modernising its economy and normalising its relations with the United States in the 1970s to the

brutal crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, from becoming a net importer of oil in 1993-4 to the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the PRC has occupied much of the post-World War II history, moving from being a relevant third during the Cold War to be the primary – perhaps unique – competitor of the US. As partly discussed in the thesis, China’s rise to the great power status – a status that today the PRC seems increasingly comfortable with – has faced challenges, pushbacks, socialisation episodes, and contestation, both domestically and from other international actors. As much as the PRC’s foreign policy is the extension of its domestic policy,<sup>12</sup> it is also inevitably influenced by the global distribution of power, the configuration of the international system, other actors’ demands, and opportunities. Therefore, one of the objectives of this thesis is to locate Iran in the global history, current, and future trajectory of China’s foreign relations. In other words, the assumption behind this work is that the IRI has its own place – certainly more limited compared to that of actors like the United States or Russia but still not negligible – in China’s rise to the great power status as much as the PRC occupies a fundamental role in Iran’s post-Revolutionary external projection. As demonstrated in this thesis, the historical junctures faced by China’s relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran since the latter’s inception in 1979 have been consistent by-products of global dynamics involving China’s opening up to the world, its economic development and energy security needs, the ascent as a great power and the attached feature of responsibility, and, perhaps most prominently, its relationship with the United States. Therefore, studying China’s relations with Iran – and, more specifically, the role taken and enacted by the PRC vis-à-vis the IRI – helps understand Beijing’s global ambitions, the contradictions of its external projections, the conflicting dimension of its foreign policy, and the strategies, goals, and limits of its attempt to emerge as the *all-weather friend* with developing countries.

Therefore, the objective of this study is threefold. The first one is providing an original approach to Sino-Iranian relations that, while following the route designed by John W. Garver, offers a comprehensive understanding that defines the partnership through the lenses of Role Theory and thus locates it within the literature on China’s international roles. The second one is enhancing the

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<sup>12</sup> Qian Qichen, ‘China’s Important Role in World Affairs,’ *Beijing Review*, 15:21 (1990): pp.11-12.

knowledge of Sino-Iranian relations by providing a balanced, thought-provoking yet informed analysis that considers the partnership's history since its inception and thus offers a theoretical and empirical map that could be handily used for future research on the topic. Since the beginning of my PhD in 2018, Sino-Iranian relations have attracted much attention, generating both high-quality scholarships and mediocre works, informed more by political hype than academic and intellectual rigour. I hope my thesis sits among the formers and will provide a tool for those interested in joining the club to avoid the trap of sensationalism surrounding this topic. In that regard, I have been lucky enough to have the chance to publish several pieces of work on the subject of Sino-Iranian relations during the past four years. In particular, two of them – a book chapter soon to be published in a book edited by Mehran Haghiriian and Luciano Zaccara and a peer-reviewed article part of a special issue on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Sino-Iranian diplomatic relations<sup>13</sup> – are directly derived from this thesis and thus included in Chapters 1 and 5 and the Conclusion. The third objective is to suggest the value of Role Theory to enhance the understanding of China's Persian Gulf strategy. Although the thesis those not directly address this topic, it constitutes a constant presence at the core of this study. More broadly, the emergence of new great power competition between Washington and Beijing has increasingly occupied the mind of those of us working on China's relations with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf sub-region, increasingly motivated by the growing evidence of the region and sub-region as spillover of the great power competition. In that sense, the intriguing world of policymaking is asking us – often obsessively – to decode how this fascinating phenomenon will unfold in the coming years. None of us has a crystal ball. Still, I believe that Role Theory could help us better understand a piece of this puzzle.

Ultimately, I believe that any modern research in the broader fields of international relations, area studies, and security studies should be policy relevant. Some colleagues might turn up their noses. Nonetheless, I believe that it is our task to produce relevant scholarship in the real world and thus could help those designing policies to be better informed. Will they listen to us? This is a different

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<sup>13</sup> Jacopo Scita, 'The Sino-Iranian Relationship: A Role Theory Approach to a Non-Western Great Power-Middle Power Partnership,' in Mehran Haghiriian and Luciano Zaccara (eds.), *China's Economic and Political Presence in the Middle East and South Asia* (forthcoming in 2023); and Jacopo Scita, 'China-Iran Relations Through the Prism of Sanctions,' *Asian Affairs*, 53:1, (2022)

question. In my experience, I can say that all the policymakers, officials, and people working in the private sector I have met have shown genuine interest in what I said about China-Iran relations. For this reason, this thesis has been thought, designed, and written with the idea in mind that it could also be usable for that outside academia. If some theoretical depth or academic nuances got lost in translations, I hope my fellow academics would understand.

## The theoretical framework

The notion of national roles also permeates implicitly much of the literature that describes the major characteristic of the contemporary international system.<sup>14</sup>

In the abovementioned quote, Kal Holsti, widely considered the pioneer of the role theory of international relations, brings out a decisive fact. The discourse around inter-states relations and the international system developed after World War II is naturally permeated by international roles. For instance, the notion of “superpower” implicitly encapsulates a repertoire of behaviours, actions, ambitions and responsibilities that even forestalls actual policymaking. The same can be said about the so-called “non-aligned states,”<sup>15</sup> whose rejection of the Cold War’s bloc politics and desire to represent the Third World cause was translated into a movement and a discursive milieu that transcended the political and ideological differences existing among those states. In other words, the adherence to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) could be read as the performance of a specific international role. Borrowing from the analyses of roles originated within the sociological and psychological research, role theory has been successfully applied to studying inter-state relations.

Role theory of international relations has grown as a theory located at the intersection between Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations Theory. This theoretical location is fascinating because it gives role theory the analytical ability to explain and understand the interactions between agents and structure.<sup>16</sup> This aspect is crucial in the case of Sino-Iranian relations, where the structure is defined by the semi-rigid perimeter set by the Great Power-Middle Power

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<sup>14</sup>Kal Holsti, ‘National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.14, No.3 (1970), p. 234

<sup>15</sup>John A. Graham, ‘The Non-Aligned Movement after the Havana Summit’, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.34, No.1 (1980), p. 153

<sup>16</sup>Cameron G. Thies and Marijke Breuning, ‘Integrating Foreign Policy Analysis and International Relations through Role Theory’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol.8, No.1 (2012), p. 1

dynamics. Performing an international role is an eminently social action. Role-taking processes happen vis-à-vis other states, international organisations, or the international system itself. The encounter between the State's own role conception with the structural opportunities and limits offered by the international system and the other actors' expectations in the role-taking process ultimately define the emergence and performance of a specific international role.

### **Chapter outline**

The Chapter begins by introducing the theoretical foundation of the present thesis, the so-called Role Theory of International Relations, with its central concepts, including the definition and features of international roles, and most relevant contributions, such as the pioneering work of Kal Holsti, Malici and Walker's binary role theory, and Marijke Breuning's "cognitive model of the agent-structure relationship." From that, the Chapter presents the two-dimensional interactionist model that represents the modest theoretical contribution of this Thesis and the theoretical model I adopted to investigate China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations. Drawing from the model, the Chapter then introduces the main features of the structural and ideational dimensions of Beijing's *role*, bringing forward some of the critical concepts developed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this study. Notably, that section of Chapter 1 goes beyond the timeframe considered through the four historical episodes presented in Chapter 5, linking Chapter 1 with the Conclusion of the Thesis, suggesting the opportunity to continue applying the analytical framework adopted in this study to the interpretation of contemporary and future developments in Sino-Iranian relations.

### **Defining international roles**

Role Theory has offered multiple definitions of international roles. Yet, beyond the fundamental distinction between national role conceptions and international roles, with the latter being a component of the former, a useful definition has been presented by Stephen G. Walker in his 1987 study, in which he defines international roles as 'repertoires of behaviour, inferred from other's expectations and one's own



conceptions, selected at least partly in response to cues and demands.<sup>17</sup> A more refined definition, then, was offered by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald in the introduction to their seminal volume of *China's International Roles*. According to Harnisch et al., international roles are

Regular behavioural patterns, constituted by ego and alter expectations about specific functions within a social group. International roles can be defined along three dimensions: time, function, and obligation. A fourth dimension, ego-/alter-orientation, overlies these three.<sup>18</sup>

This definition highlights the four dimensions that characterise each international role. The first one is temporality, which describes the timeframe in which an actor has performed or attempted to perform a specific role. Functionality, then, ‘captures that ego and alter expectations define and prescribe a specific scope of behaviour for a certain role.’<sup>19</sup> Obligation ‘describes the degree to which an actor is bound politically or legally to a certain role and/or its performance.’<sup>20</sup> The fourth dimension, the ego-/alter-orientation, encapsulate what fundamentally distinguishes international roles from national identities. While the latter refers to the self-representation of an actor, the former is the result of a dialectic between *ego and alter* expectations:

Roles expectations may vary considerably. On the one hand, they regularly comprise ego expectations – that is, domestic and/or individual expectations as to what the appropriate role is and what it implies – and alter expectations – that is, implicit or explicit demands by others (counter-roles or complementary roles, audience cues). [...] Roles, and even more role sets, entail a potential conflict within a role (intra-role conflicts, e.g., between ego and alter expectations) and between roles (inter-roles conflicts).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Stephen G. Walker, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987)

<sup>18</sup>Sebastian Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. X

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Sebastian Harnisch, ‘Role Theory: Operationalization of Key Concepts’, in Sebastian Harnisch et al. (eds.), *Role Theory in International Relations. Approaches and Analyses*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 8

What emerges from Harnisch's definition is the social nature of roles. Indeed, international roles exist within social groups formed by states or other organisations and are the product of social interaction between an actor's ego – its self-representation and self-projection – and the *alter* expectations. Therefore, the social relationship that involves international roles is bivalent. Roles and role-taking processes are the results of social interactions as much as they affect and shape the socialisation mechanisms within the international community. Hence roles are taken and performed within organised groups.<sup>22</sup> The choice of a precise role within a defined context or group is conditioned by both material and ideational factors.<sup>23</sup>

As noted by Le Prestre, 'the articulation of a national role betrays preferences, operationalises an image of the world, triggers expectations, and influences the definition of the situation and the available options to conduct international relations.'<sup>24</sup> In that sense, national roles conceptions are in constant dialogue with the act of foreign policymaking, restricting the options available to the policymakers according to the prescriptions they provide. In other words, 'by determining the decision makers' perception of their countries, roles necessarily influence the kind of behaviour that is expected or seen as appropriate.'<sup>25</sup> As described in the thesis, this is apparent in China's relations with Iran, where the prescriptions derived from the PRC's other international roles appear to pose significant limits to China's policy options in dealing with Iran. In this case, the main element that emerges is that international roles are not all hierarchically equal as they reflect a hierarchy of relations that is structurally and politically apparent.

The performance of a *role* could lead to two types of role conflicts. As explained by Holsti, inter-role conflicts occur because an actor could adopt multiple

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<sup>22</sup>Cameron Thies, 'Role Theory and Foreign Policy', in Robert A. Denemark and Renée Marlin-Bennett (eds.), *The International Studies Encyclopaedia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 6336

<sup>23</sup>See, Cameron Thies, 'State Socialization and Structural Realism', *Security Studies*, Vol.19, No.4 (2011), p. 703; Cameron Thies, 'The Roles of Bipolarity: A Role Theoretic Understanding of the Effects of Ideas and Material Factors on the Cold War', *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol.14, No.3 (2013), p. 269

<sup>24</sup> Philippe G. Le Prestre, 'Author! Author! Defining Foreign Policy Roles after the Cold War', in P. Le Prestre (ed.), *Role Quests in the Post-Cold War Era: Foreign Policies in Transition*, (Montreal: McGill and Queen's University Press, 1997), p. 5

<sup>25</sup> Michael Grossman, 'Role Theory and Foreign Policy Change: The Transformation of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s', *International Politics*, Vol.42, No.3 (2005), p. 337

roles simultaneously.<sup>26</sup> This is not surprising given that modern states are engaged in a potentially uncountable number of interactions with their homologues, the institutions of the international system, private corporations, non-governmental organisations, civil society, etc., that could result in an equal number of *roles* whose simultaneous performance could expose their incompatibility. Beyond such hyperbole, the case of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran is a relevant example of an international role that is inherently prone to generate inter-role conflicts, given that some of its tenants and prescriptions appear incompatible with other roles performed by the PRC. Vice versa, intra-role conflicts emerge within the performance of a specific role, often as the result of an underperformance related to a failure of the role-performer in satisfying the *alter* expectations. In both cases, role conflicts test the resilience of the role involved in it, potentially leading to its redefinition or, in extreme cases, the actors involved in its performance decide to abandon that *role*.

In operational terms, international roles can be used as an effective descriptive tool that combines the material and ideational elements underlying the conduct of international relations of a specific actor. In that sense, international roles are potentially unlimited in number as they could be taken and enacted in every relationship pursued by an actor – a state, an international organisation, an NGO, etc. – within the international community. This descriptive function of international roles, which locates them at the intersection of structuralist and post-structuralist international relations theory, appears particularly effective in describing the nuances, tensions, and engagement patterns typical of inter-state relations that present complex ideational and material interactions.

### **Kal Holsti and the origin of Role Theory**

The conceptual problem that inspired Holsti's pioneering study of national roles has its grounds in the predominant formulation of the balance of power theory. The categorisation of states presented by the theorists of the balance of power implicitly assigns to the states a role – namely those of the aggressor, the defender, and the balancer. However, as noted by Holsti, this formulation does not explain if the system's dynamics are the result of the enactment of those roles or if the system's

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<sup>26</sup> Holsti, 'National Role Conceptions', p. 227

functioning is defined by the actual condition of balance or imbalance of the system itself.<sup>27</sup> In extending role theory from its sociological and psychological roots to foreign policy analysis, Holsti introduces the concept of international status as the equivalent of what role theorists call status or position. Roles are made of norms, expected behaviours, rights and duties associated with the occupation of a specific position within a society<sup>28</sup>. Transferring the social conception of position to international relations is problematic. In fact, the high degree of complexity and the number of levels of interaction that constitute the international system makes defining a pattern of activities and foreign policy choices related to a specific position occupied by a state significantly complex. According to Holsti, however, the distribution of power and the associated state taxonomy are sufficiently indicative. In other words, definitions such as “great power” or “middle power” encompass ‘rough distinctions of status’ that reasonably resonate in the mind of decision-makers.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, K.J. Holsti's international role theory model accepts as one of its main constitutive variables the states' status understood as an estimation of the states' ranking within the international system. Status, consequently, is one of the intervening variables in the process of role performance.

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<sup>27</sup>Holsti, 'National Role Conceptions', p. 234

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 238

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 242

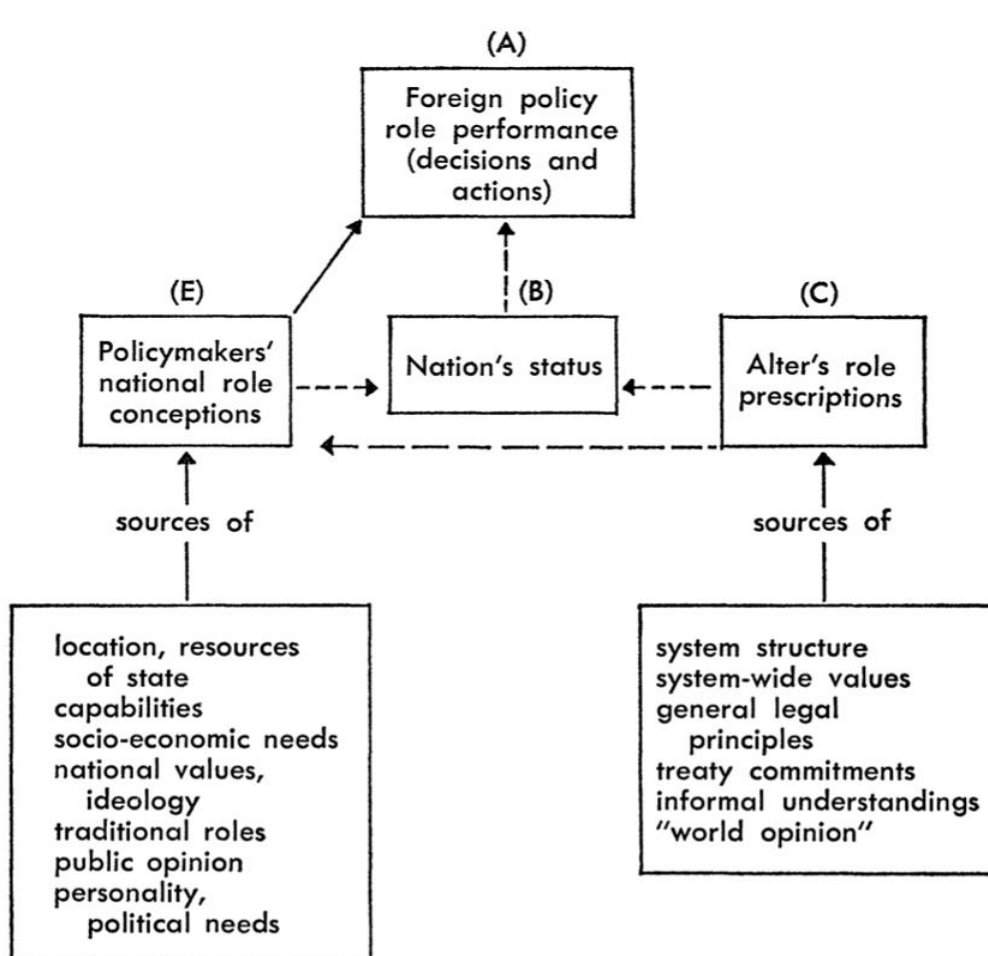


FIGURE 1.1 HOLSTI'S NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTION MODEL

However, the most critical variable in Holsti's model is the 'policymakers' conceptions of their nation's orientations and tasks in the international system or subordinate regional systems.'<sup>30</sup> In fact, despite acknowledging their importance, the study does not explore the impact of status and external prescriptions on role performance.

### **National role conceptions: the state's *self***

National role conceptions define the self-image that policymakers have of their own state and its outward projection. Since national role conceptions vary even between states with similar status within the international system, it is apparent that national roles depend upon state-specific variables. According to Holsti, those are: 'location and major topographical features of the state; natural, economic and technical resources; available capabilities; traditional policies; socio-economic demands and

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 245

needs [...]; national values, doctrines, or ideologies; and the personality of key policymakers'.<sup>31</sup> Since states do not exist in a vacuum, national roles are also impacted by external factors, both systemic and relational.

National roles encapsulate the operational code of a leader or a group. According to Hudson, 'defining an operational code involves identifying the core beliefs of a leader or a group [or a nation], as well as the preferred means and style of pursuing goals.'<sup>32</sup> Therefore, I argue that the operational code adopted by a polity cannot be separated from the milieu (cultural, historical, geographical, political, etc.) that informs the polity itself. It can be argued that the definition of the operational code of a nation is a complex task, especially given the number of actors involved in modern foreign policymaking. Therefore, *is it possible to refer to a single, unified operational code that intervenes in the foreign policymaking of a modern state?* This question is not only pertinent but has been addressed by Role Theory and FPA scholars, who largely agree that international roles emerge from a process of domestic contestation that partly reflects the existence of different operational codes.<sup>33</sup> However, what the milieu provides to policymakers before any phase of domestic contestation is

A repertoire or palette of adaptive responses from which members build off-the-shelf strategies of action. What matters [are] 'chunk' of prefabricated cultural response. We may not be able to predict choice, [...] but we can begin to identify what is *on* the shelf, ready and available to be used or not.'<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, according to Harnisch,

The distinction between historical and current self remains fuzzy. In these cases (many former colonies in Africa and the Middle East come to mind), the historical victim role still shapes current conduct, thereby putting specific others, the historical perpetrators, or the whole international community into the position of having the historical responsibility to "right historical wrongs". [...] Foreign policy identities, then, tell us specifically which historical experience translates into which current self-

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 246

<sup>32</sup>Valerie M. Hudson, 'Cultural Expectations of One's Own and Other Nations' Foreign Policy Action Templates', *Political Psychology*, Vol.20, No.4 (1999), p. 768

<sup>33</sup>Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles*, p. 3

<sup>34</sup>Hudson, 'Cultural Expectations', p. 786

conceptualization, which in turn allows for a certain international role-taking and making but not for another.<sup>35</sup>

As will be clarified later in this work, a relevant part of what is on the historical and ideational shelf of Sino-Iranian relations is apparent.

### **Which national role? Holsti's taxonomy of national roles**

Beyond defining what roles are and how they emerge, scholars have produced different lists of the potential roles enacted by states within the international community and its sub-unities. In its pioneering work, Kal Holsti was the first to challenge the idea that actors can only play one role simultaneously, introducing a list of 17 different roles played by states between 1965 and 1967. According to Holsti's findings, 'the average number of roles expressed per state during this period was 4.6, with a range of 0 (Ivory Coast) to 8 (USA) expressed roles.'<sup>36</sup> It does not come as a surprise that the United States – possibly the most influential and active state within the international community at the time of Holsti's study – was identified as the one who bore more roles than anyone else.

Holsti's typology is particularly interesting because it collects a series of sub-roles that can be associated with significant roles such as that of the Superpower or that of the emerging Great Power. Despite being redacted in the early 1970s, Holsti's list of roles is still adopted by several scholars who use it as a base to develop actor or context-specific analysis of role-taking processes and enactment.<sup>37</sup> The following table includes the 17 roles identified by Holsti in his study. The list consists of a final general category, "other roles", that provides for 'other national roles conceptions appeared in the sources, but their frequency was not great enough to include them in the taxonomy.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Sebastian Harnisch, 'Role Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 12

<sup>36</sup>Thies, 'Role Theory', p. X

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 271

Table 1.1: Holsti's typology of International Roles

<i>Role</i>	<i>Examples</i> <sup>39</sup>
Bastion of revolution-liberator	China; Tanzania
Regional leader	Ethiopia; Egypt
Regional protector	US; Great Britain
Active independent (non-aligned)	Yugoslavia; Turkey
Liberation supporter	China; Bulgaria
Anti-imperialist agent	North Vietnam; Soviet Union
Defender of faith (i.e., value system)	Germany; US
Mediator-integrator	Lebanon; Sweden
Regional-subsystem collaborator	Belgium; Japan
Developer	Israel; Kuwait; US
Bridge	Cyprus; Pakistan
Faithfull ally	Luxembourg; North Vietnam
Independent	Afghanistan; Zambia
Example	Malaysia; Philippines
Internal Development	Brazil; Finland
Isolate	Burma; Cambodia
Protectee	Laos; Czechoslovakia
Other roles	France; China; etc.

Interestingly, part of the roles defined by Kal Holsti appears to be informed by a dominant ideational-ideological component. *Bastions of revolution* have ‘a duty to organise or lead various types of revolutionary movements abroad. One task [is to be] an ideological inspirer.’<sup>40</sup> The role of the *defender of faith*, indeed, bears the responsibility of being the ideological leader of a group of other states, actively defending a specific system of shared beliefs.<sup>41</sup> Other roles, otherwise, seem to have a more structural characterisation: *Regional leaders*, for instance, are supported in their claim of leadership by a position of power within the region they are part of. Therefore, what Holsti has been able to identify is the complex nature of international roles. Ideational-ideological factors and material-structural factors are constitutive components of roles and intervene both at the *ego* level – the self-

<sup>39</sup>It appears clear that Holsti's examples reflect the historical period in which his research was conducted. However, the fact that scholars still use this taxonomy is a clear testimony of the theoretical magnitude of Holsti's study.

<sup>40</sup>Holsti, 'National Role Conceptions', p. 260-261

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 264



conception of an actor that perceives itself as the *regional leader* or the *defender of liberalism* – and at the *other* level – the acceptance of one state’s role ambition by the different actors involved in the role-taking process. In other words, a state that claims to be a defender of non-interference should be perceived as credible in its assertion by its interlocutors to perform the role of *anti-imperialist agent*.

### **Malici and Walker’s Binary Role Theory**

In their study on Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations, Akan Malici and Stephen Walker present a binary role theory that ‘specifies relations among the role expectations of alter, the role conceptions of ego, and the role demands associated with the positions of ego and alter as the enactment or performance of roles (decisions and actions) by states in world politics.’<sup>42</sup> The theory ‘describes how and explains why the two-worlds-of-interaction proposition operates to integrate the world of mental events (beliefs) at the micro-level of foreign policy analysis with the world of social events (behaviours) at the macro level of the international system.’<sup>43</sup> Malici and Walker’s binary role theory appears to be particularly interesting and efficacious in acknowledging the tension between material factors – the structural distribution of power and the related national interests – and the ideational elements that shape the processes of role definition and role enacting.

Binary role theory is based on an analytical framework that distinguishes between two models. The first one – labelled by the authors as *The World as It Is* – reflects a structural understanding of role theory, within which power and the way it is distributed are crucial in defining the menu of roles available to a state.<sup>44</sup> The relative power of an actor defines the constraints that, through the interaction with the actor’s national interests, construct Malici and Walker’s general typology of roles. The roles are divided between cooperative (client, partner, and patron) and conflictual (rebel, rival, and hegemon). The structural model of role demands, operationalised through a specifically designed matrix, allows predicting the role played by a state according to its structural position within the international system. Moreover, the matrix suggests the existence of “idealised dyads” of roles and

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<sup>42</sup>Malici and Walker, *Role Theory*, p. 8

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 10

counter-roles that are, again, derived from the interaction between the distribution of power and national interests.<sup>45</sup> The premises of this model are grounded in the structuralist tradition of International Relations Theory. In the model called *The World in Their Minds*, which Malici and Walker brought from Yacov Vertzberger's book of the same name<sup>46</sup>, roles are understood as the product of the perceptions, ideas, and visions of the agents. In that sense, this 'ideational model of role conceptions and role expectations' reflects a post-structuralist understanding of international relations. Role theory, indeed, is rooted in the attempt to reconstruct and understand the dialectic between structure and agents.<sup>47</sup>

### **The two-dimensional interactionist model of international roles**

To study China's *role* in relations with Iran, I propose a theoretical model combining two dimensions – one structural and the other ideational – constitutive of the role and that interact together, in light of their different features of rigidity, in the processes of role-taking and role-enactment. The model aims to give a modest theoretical contribution to the Role Theory of International Relations by offering a generalisable framework, adaptable to both qualitative and quantitative research, that helps define the *role* taken and enacted by a specific actor within bilateral relations through the definition of the critical structural, material, and ideational components of that particular international role. Arguably, the model could also be extended to studying systemic roles (e.g., China's *role* as responsible great power) as long as it is possible to define a system of reference, which in the case of bilateral roles is broadly defined by the *alter* expectations, through which articulating the structural and ideational supply and demand dynamics that characterise the role.

While building on some of the concepts presented by Malici and Walker, the two-dimensional component of the model draws inspiration from Marijke Breuning's "cognitive model of the agent-structure relationship", which has the scope of studying the national role conception of a given actor. According to Breuning

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 13

<sup>46</sup>Yacov Y. I. Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. X

<sup>47</sup>Thies and Breuning, 'Integrating Foreign Policy', p. 1

The national role conception framework places its emphasis there: it seeks to understand how actors fashion their role in the international system, navigating between domestic sources of identity and/or cultural heritage, taking advantage of the material resources at their disposal, circumnavigating as best as possible the obstacles imposed by their position in the international structure.<sup>48</sup>

Breuning's model, therefore, explicitly acknowledges that national role conceptions sit at the 'intersection of ideational and material aspects of international relations,' reconnecting agency and structure in the explanation of foreign policy.<sup>49</sup>

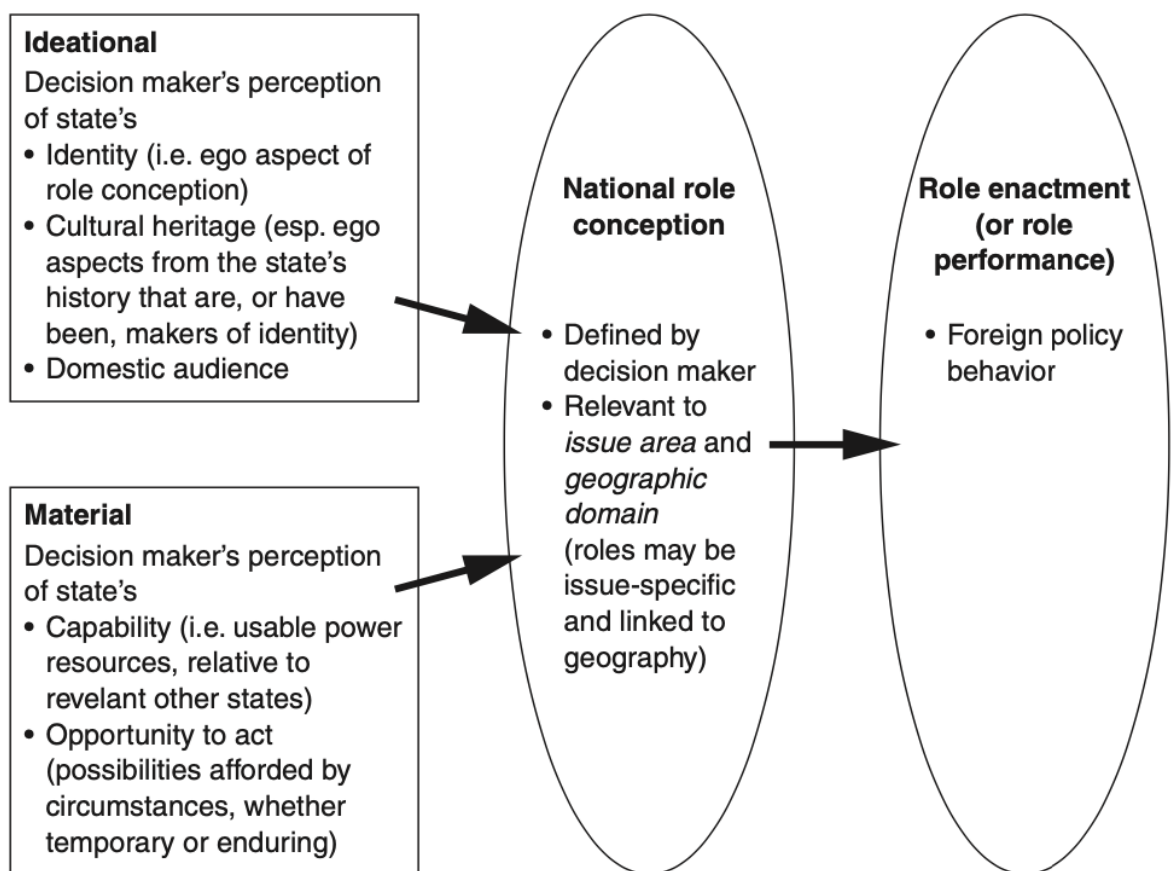


FIGURE 1.2: BREUNING'S COGNITIVE MODEL OF THE AGENT-STRUCTURE RELATIONSHIP

Nonetheless, the abovementioned cognitive model applies to the actor's national role conception, focusing more on the actor's self-representation than on how the interaction with the *alter* subject effectively shapes the *role* taken and enacted in that specific bilateral relations. In that sense, the model I propose aims to fill this

<sup>48</sup> Marijke Breuning, 'Role Theory Research in International Relations', in Harnisch et al. (eds.), *Role Theory in International Relations*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 26

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

gap. The ideational and material dimensions remain the crucial frameworks, although their composition diverges from Breuning's conceptualisation. This is essentially due to the relational nature of the model, which implies that the interaction between the actor that enacts the *role* and the one that accepts it is itself a constitutive component of the two dimensions of the model.

Therefore, the structural dimension is constituted by (1) the actual absolute and relative distribution of power, understood in realist terms, between the two actors involved in the role-taking and role-enactment processes, which defines the overarching boundaries of the structural component of the *role*. (2) The material and strategic interests that the role-seeker identifies in establishing relations with the other actor. Such interests are not and cannot be completely unilateral. Instead, at least to a minimum, they must be reciprocated by the actor's material and strategic demands subject to the role-taking process. (3) The external intervening variables, namely the other bilateral relations that the role-seeker pursues and that have a significant entanglement with the relationship that is the object of the role-taking and role-enactment processes. The dyads formed by these external relations are read in structural terms, thus defined by the same elements described above [1,2]. A triad is created when these dyads interact with the relations between the role-seeker and the country subject to the role-taking process.

The ideational component is also formed by the sum of identities, cultural and historical heritages, ideas, and self-perceptions that constitute the *milieu* of the role-seeker. Yet, such a milieu is not necessarily involved in the *role* in its entirety, but (4) it always contains those specific concepts and ideas that are functional for pursuing those specific bilateral relations. Thinkers and policymakers operate such a selection to construct an ideational language understandable by the actor subject to the role-taking process. Therefore, a crucial element of mutuality is involved in defining the role's ideational component, and the model acknowledges it. As in the structural component, (5) external intervening variables critically impact the ideational dimension. National role conceptions, identities, foreign policy ideas, historical traumas, ideologies, external ideational demands, etc., exist and operate within every bilateral and multilateral relationship an actor pursues within the international system. Consequently, the ideational dimension of particularly relevant international relations pursued by the role-seeker intervenes as either a

source of legitimisation or a challenger of the ideational construct that informs the *role*.

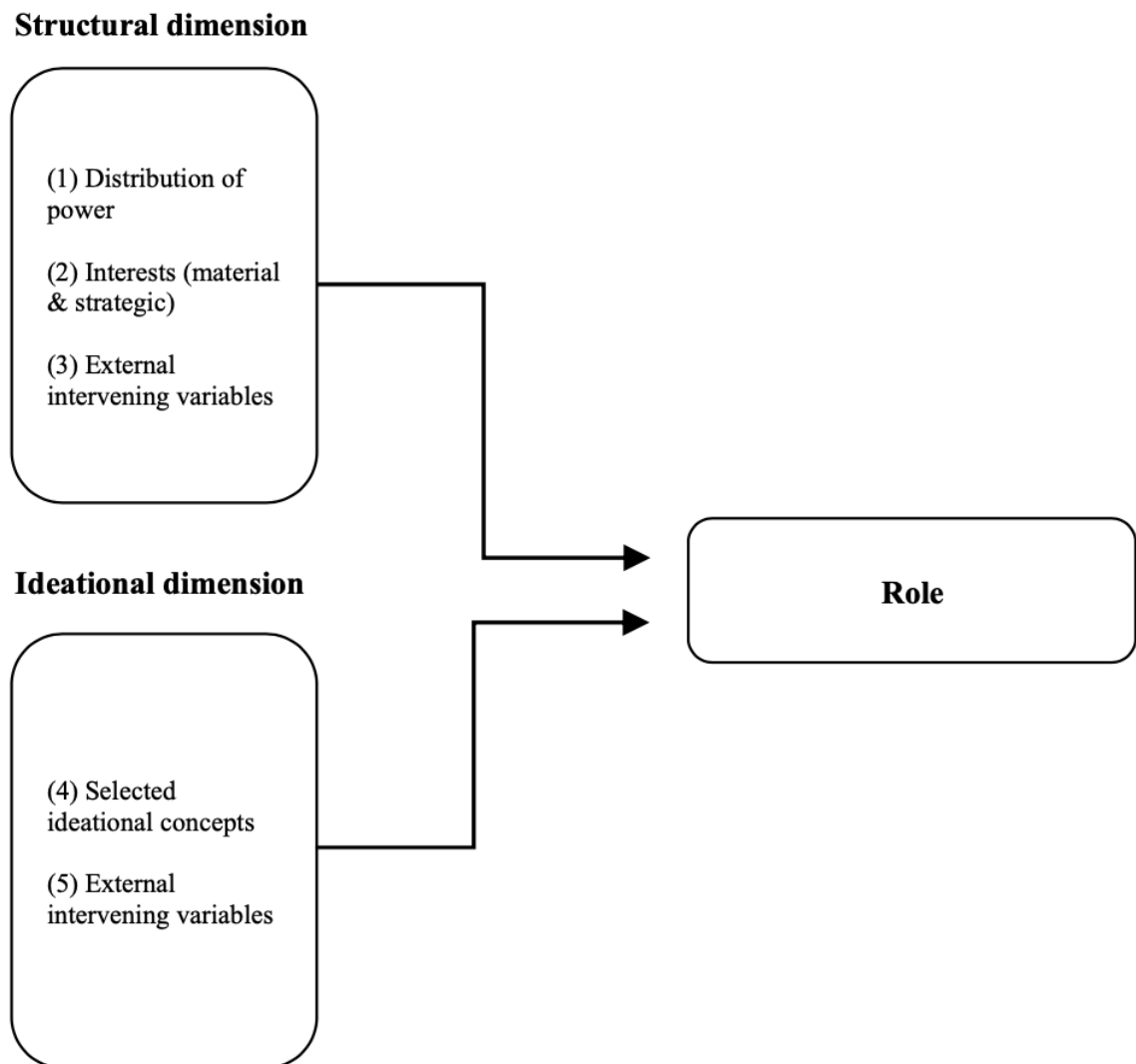
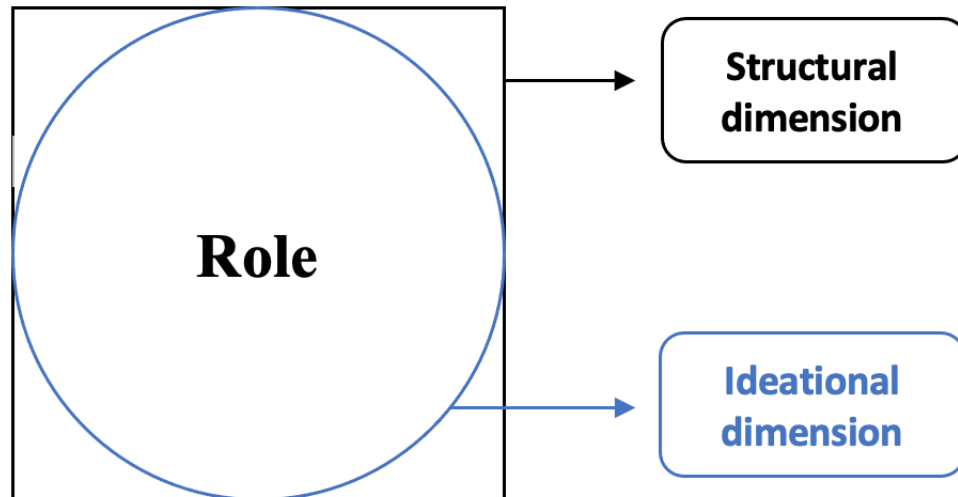


FIGURE 1.3: THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL ROLES

The two dimensions presented in the model work together to define the *role* taken by an actor in relation to another subject. During the role-taking process and the following phase of role-enactment, the structural and ideational dimensions remain crucial, interacting together to ensure the performance of the role. In other words, what the model acknowledges is the double level at which the two dimensions of the *role* act: one is the theoretical definition of the *role*; the other is the function of the material (e.g., interests, policies, active political support, etc.) and ideational (e.g., narratives, signals of diplomatic support; tacit support, etc.) elements in sustaining overtime the *role* itself. Here an important question emerges. Different

levels of rigidity characterise the two components. Intuitively, the structural component is more rigid than its ideational homologue. The relative and absolute power distribution between two actors on the international stage is usually stable. Thus, it provides a perimeter of action that is not immediately adaptable to compensate for the shortcomings in the role performance. Vice versa, the ideational dimension appears more plastic: narratives and ideas could be more easily stretched and adapted.

As described in the thesis, the interaction model adopted to analyse China's role-taking and role enactment in the partnership with Iran is based on two main premises. The first one is that the Sino-Iranian partnership is a typical great power-middle power relationship. As already exposed, this defines the structural boundaries within which China's role-taking and role enactment vis-à-vis Iran happens. Using Malici and Walker's language, this dimension reflects *The World as It Is*. The second one is that the shelf upon which the menu of ideas, images, prefabricated cultural responses, and narratives are located is that of the non-Western identity. The otherness in respect of the West is *The World in [the] Minds* of China and Iran and when they project themselves towards each other and their partnership. These two assumptions form the perimeter within which China's role-taking and role enactment vis-à-vis Iran happens. As stated, this perimeter is both structural and ideational. This compresence reflects the function of both material and ideational variables in shaping the ego and *alter* expectations that ultimately define the role taken and enacted by China vis-à-vis Iran. Therefore, the two dimensions should be seen as two concentric figures within the Sino-Iranian dyad.



**FIGURE 1.4: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE STRUCTURAL AND IDEATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL ROLES**

The great power-middle power framework, intuitively more rigid than the ideational one, is represented here by a square. The circle, otherwise, identifies the non-Western identity that constitutes the ideational framework of China's role-taking and role enactment in the partnership with Iran. As international roles are the product of both material and ideational factors, the former is located within and affects the structural dimension of the model. At the same time, the latter are the critical components of the ideational dimension. In the figure above, the circle and the square are equivalent. This condition reflects the overlap between *ego* and *alter* material and ideational expectations. Therefore, the superimposition of the structural and ideational frameworks happens when the role enacted by China in Sino-Iranian relations results from policies that coherently reflect the narrative that precedes and sustains them. Or in other words, when the structural and ideational dimension overlaps, the role taken and enacted by China is accepted and uncontested by Iran. This situation is, of course, ideal and rare. Most likely, the *ego/alter* dialectic is informed by an ongoing tension between material and ideational expectations, an inherent cause of intra-role conflicts. While the structural framework defined by the Great Power-Middle Power relationship is semi-rigid, and thus the expansion of the square is limited, the ideational framework appears to be more flexible. The importance of narratives and references to the shared identity that forms the *ego* and *alter* expectations in the role bore by China seems more likely to be adapted to the structural limitations inherent to the great

power-middle power framework. Therefore, one of the objectives of this work is to establish how relevant the ideational framework is in sustaining China's role-taking and role enactment in the partnership with Iran, as well as how it intervenes to sustain or compensate policy decisions that are conflictual with the PRC's *role*.

The study of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations consists of three distinctive-yet-interconnected parts. The role definition is a bird's-eye view of the structural and ideational components of the *role*. Their reconstruction is done retrospectively through the study of the features of the partnership and the interaction between the PRC and the IRI. The other two, vice-versa, look at the *role* in the action. The role-taking phase is where the role-seeker takes a specific role as the product of existing structural, material, and ideational factors and the interaction with the *alter*. In that regard, the case of Sino-Iranian relations is fascinating because the role-taking phase coincides with the emergence and consolidation of the new regime in Iran, the Islamic Republic. At that stage, the *alter* accepts (or refuses) the *role*. The role-enactment phase is where the *role* is performed and influences the conduct of relations between the two actors. It is important to note that the international roles are never static. Even in the role-enactment phase, when the ego and alter have already accepted the *role*, they are influenced, adjusted, and challenged by the conduct of the relations between the two actors involved and the influence of the external intervening variables.

### **The organised context of China's role-taking and role enactment in Sino-Iranian relations**

International roles are also defined by the status occupied by the states within the structure of the international system. The case of China's role-taking and role-performance is fascinating because it happens within a bilateral context characterised by an apparent asymmetry in the distribution of power. Indeed, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is characterised by being a typical Great Power-Middle Power partnership.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, to develop an adequate theoretical model for Sino-Iranian relations, it is necessary to define how this specific feature delimits the structural perimeter of China's role-taking and role-performance vis-à-vis Iran.

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<sup>50</sup>Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Great Power-Middle Power Dynamics: The Case of China and Iran', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.28 (2019), p. 468



The possession of material resources and capabilities distinguishes great powers and middle powers. According to the fundamental assumption of Realism, those are distributed within a system dominated by anarchy. However, the possession of resources and capabilities – the distribution of power – is asymmetrical. But asymmetry is what generates hierarchy. Therefore, because the distinction between Great Powers and Middle Powers results from power asymmetry, it is fundamentally hierarchical. Hierarchy and power asymmetry define the framework of Sino-Iranian relations, modelling the structural perimeter within which China's role-taking process vis-à-vis Iran takes shape. The People's Republic of China has been a nuclear power since 1964, and it is estimated to have the second-highest military budget in the world.<sup>51</sup> As detailed in Chapter 2, these and other features allow classifying China as a great power. The IRI can be considered a middle power. Iran has a 'comparatively large population, economy and conventional army'<sup>52</sup> that allow the country to exercise regional influence and, within the Middle East, to affect the policy of external great powers. Furthermore, Iran appears to be powerful enough to credibly claim a role of prominence within the Middle East, as well as 'to resist a coalition of other regional states against [it]'<sup>53</sup>. Tehran's enduring confrontation with the United States, its network of regional allies and unconventional proxies, and its competition with Saudi Arabia prove that Iran has reached the regional power status.

### **Power asymmetry in great power-middle power relations**

The fundamental feature of the encounter between great powers and middle powers is power asymmetry. As described in Chapter 2, the most significant outcome of power asymmetry is the IRI's limited agency within Sino-Iranian relations. Especially from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Iran's growing international isolation has increasingly pushed the country towards China. The PRC, indeed, has proved to be the only major international actor willing to keep buying Iran's oil in defiance of international sanctions. This has come at a price. Chinese goods have

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<sup>51</sup>Nan Tian et al., 'Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2017', *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (2018)

<sup>52</sup>Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 'Great Power-Middle Power Dynamics', p. 469

<sup>53</sup>Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 7

massively saturated the Iranian domestic market, while the “Sinicization” of the country’s economy and energy industry has allowed China to ‘dictate “the rules of the game.”’<sup>54</sup> A further sign of imbalance is, again, related to energy relations. Although Beijing is Iran’s largest oil buyer, China has based its energy security strategy on the diversification of suppliers. This has resulted in Tehran not being among the PRC’s top three suppliers since 2012. While Beijing offers Iran an economic lifeline, the former does not occupy a dominant place in the latter’s energy security.

Even from a more political perspective, the Sino-Iranian partnership is informed by a strong power asymmetry. Evidence emerges from the historical analysis of the US-China-Iran triangle. Indeed, while Beijing’s support for Tehran reflects the strategy of keeping Iran strong enough to act as a bulwark against Washington’s attempt to acquire a position of total hegemony in the Persian Gulf, developments such as the 1997 Chinese disengagement from Iran’s nuclear program show a more complex picture. According to Garver, ‘China’s 1996–97 decisions to suspend [...] cooperation with Iran were a function of calculations about China’s relations with the United States.’<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the 1997 episode shows that despite Iran’s importance to China, it does not match the one of the United States. The reasons are clear. Beijing and Washington are engaged in enduring, first-tier competition, and their economic, political, and security relations outmatch Sino-Iranian relations. When they collide, relations between the two Great Powers, therefore, prevail over those between the Great and the Middle powers. For Iran, the relationship with China is a first-tier partnership, especially in the confrontation with Washington. For China, Sino-Iranian relations represent a second-tier partnership that can eventually be sacrificed in favour of the United States.

Therefore, Sino-Iranian relations reflect the power dynamics of a classic great power-middle power partnership. Those dynamics are internally characterised by the existing power asymmetry and externally heightened by a turbulent regional system. Therefore, the framework that emerges from analysing the distribution of power within and around Sino-Iranian relations is semi-rigid. The distribution of power and regional configuration may be subject to minor adjustments that could

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<sup>54</sup>Ehteshami et al., ‘Chinese-Iranian mutual strategic perspectives’, pp. 6-7

<sup>55</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 233

have a (limited) impact on the predictability of great power-middle power dynamics.<sup>56</sup> Still, this framework will keep setting the boundaries of Sino-Iranian relations. However, the great power-middle power framework tells little about how China directly interacts with Iran. Policy decisions and narratives are located within the perimeter defined by those power dynamics and are, at least in part, impacted by that context. Nevertheless, a certain degree of agency describes how the PRC pursues its interest vis-à-vis the IRI. In this thesis, I argue that this is best described as a role-taking and role-enactment process affected by both material and non-material factors.

### **Introducing China's self-conception in Sino-Iranian relations**

A substantial part of the ideational framework that sustains the PRC's external projection and foreign policy is based upon the concept of the "Century of Humiliation."<sup>57</sup> The expression recalls the 110 years between the First Opium War (1839–42) and the establishment of the People's Republic of China by Mao Zedong in 1949. According to Kaufman, the First Opium War 'marked China's first sustained exposure to the West and highlighted imperial China's military and diplomatic weakness in the face of Western power.'<sup>58</sup> Kissinger has gone as far as defining the Opium War as the clash of two World orders.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the encounter between China and the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was more than a violent engagement. China's rich imperial history has granted it a position of substantial political and cultural dominance in East Asia. Connections with neighbouring peoples and the other kingdoms in the far East have been lengthily framed as tributary relations under the idea that the Chinese Emperor 'received the commission from Heaven to rule the universe.'<sup>60</sup> Losing a war against the British and being forced to concede ports and commercial privileges to Western power

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<sup>56</sup>For instance, it can be argued that significant advancements in the Belt and Road Projects, such as the full operationalisation of the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor – of which Iran is a pivotal node – could increase the IRI's relative leverage vis-à-vis China.

<sup>57</sup>See, Alison A. Kaufman, 'The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives', *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, (March 2011); Wang Zheng, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)

<sup>58</sup>Kaufman, 'The Century of Humiliation', p. 2

<sup>59</sup>Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), p. 45

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11

profoundly challenged this self-perception. The independence movements emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the collapse of the millenary imperial system in 1911, the conflict with Japan during the World War II, and the civil war between the Nationalist Parties and Red Army completed a period of unprecedented chaos begun with the trauma of the First Opium War.<sup>61</sup>

Although some Chinese scholars have challenged the dominance of this “victim mentality” in the contemporary PRC’s foreign policy,<sup>62</sup> still is one of the rhetorical and ideational tools used by the Chinese authorities to frame the relationships between China and the Developing World. According to Brady, a typical Chinese diplomatic tool is to seek “common points” with the foreign interlocutor to establish a good relationship and instil a “positive sentiment” towards China in the partner. That first step precedes and sustains the actual policymaking.<sup>63</sup> The narrative of the national humiliation suffered after the encounter with the West is powerful because it allows China to create a sentiment of empathy with those countries and regions that have been the victims of Western imperialism. The empathy generated by this common point is sustained by two related features of China’s approach toward the developing countries.

The first one is the constant reference to history as the foundation of the inter-states relationships. In the case of Africa, Beijing has put great effort into defining the historical roots of its engagement with the African continent.<sup>64</sup> Through this constant reference to history, China shows respect for and knowledge of the historical roots of the foreign partner, defines a relational framework deeper than practical interests, and reinforces empathy. Arguably, the case of the Sino-Iranian partnership is comparable to that of Sino-African relations. The other source of empathy pushed by the Chinese narratives is that of promoting an alternative vision of the World order. Having experienced the bitterness of humiliation perpetrated by the West, Beijing projects itself as the bearer of an alternative image of international affairs. This vision is sustained by the rhetoric of a ‘national culture

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<sup>61</sup>Kaufman, ‘The Century of Humiliation’, p. 2

<sup>62</sup>Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 43

<sup>63</sup>Anne Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 5-6

<sup>64</sup>Christopher Alden and Ana Cristina Alves, ‘History and Identity in the Construction of China’s Africa Policy’, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.35, No.115 (2008), p. X

that [is] non-competitive, non-striving and defensive'<sup>65</sup> – in direct contrast with the Western history of subjugation, imperialism, and dominance. Such rhetoric appears particularly appealing within those countries that directly experience colonialism or other forms of Western domination. Interestingly, China connects this self-perception with that of being itself a developing country. As a developing country, the PRC is experiencing a peaceful rise that 'will neither jeopardise poor countries' interests nor destabilise the international system.'<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, China's self-projected *otherness* in respect of the West is built upon the millenary history of the Chinese empire – a unique entity able to guarantee the order in Asia *under the heaven* –, the humiliating encounter with the Western powers, and the ability of the People's Republic of slowly but steadily recovering the nation from the Century of Humiliation. This vision is translated into a worldview based on peaceful coexistence, order, and non-interference. However, as Kaufman notes, 'this position, despite its seemingly revolutionary views of interstate relations, in fact, retains many of the principles of the current system.'<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, China's *otherness* remains a powerful ideational tool.

### **Introducing the ideational foundation of Iran's *alter* prescription in Sino-Iranian relations**

The second variable that constitutes Holsti's model is the '*alter's* role prescriptions.' As said, the fundamental feature of international roles is their social nature. The success of role-taking and role-performance depends upon the social – systemic or bilateral, according to the context within which the role-taking process happens – acceptance of the specific national role conception that the state is trying to affirm. Holsti's model defines the *alter's* prescriptions by structural, legal, and ideational factors. For the initial development of the theoretical model implied in this thesis, I will introduce the ideational foundation of Iran's *alter* expectations vis-à-vis China.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the product of a successful Revolution that overthrew the existing regime and radically changed Iran's position within the international system. Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, centred his

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<sup>65</sup>Kaufman, 'The Century of Humiliation', p. 3

<sup>66</sup>Alden and Alves, 'History and Identity', p. 43

<sup>67</sup>Kaufman, 'The Century of Humiliation', p. 9

reign around a vertically imposed process of modernisation and Westernization, making Iran the cornerstone of Washington's Middle East policy and importing the zeitgeist of Euro-American modernity to the country. Under the Shah, Iran was deeply integrated into the international capitalistic system,<sup>68</sup> and it reframed its self-perception as an 'Aryan, Indo-European country.'<sup>69</sup> The 1979 Revolution rejected this political and ideational alignment with a West ultimately embodied by the United States. At the same time, the Revolution was 'an act of resistance to a particular type of globalisation.'<sup>70</sup> In other words, the different actors that animated the revolutionary zeal of 1978–79 rejected a normative system – the one produced by the Cold War – that was considered *other* in respect of Iran. One of the chants of the revolutionaries, "down with the East, down with the West, long live to the Islamic Republic"<sup>71</sup>, best reflects this rejection, signalling one of the fundamental features of the IRI. According to Furtig, the Islamic Republic of Iran was built upon a 'universalist counter projection' that appealed to the unification of the Umma and the empowerment of the dispossessed masses of the Third World.<sup>72</sup>

Undoubtedly, the 1979 Revolution was a complex event that brought together different, often divergent, actors, claims, and objectives. The claim for an Iranian *otherness* and independence was transversal among the revolutionary actors. Arguably, the events that followed the Revolution and the international reactions polarised the IRI's external projection around the opposition to the United States and its main regional ally, Israel. The Iraq-Iran war and the end of the Cold War increased Iran's international isolation. However, as noted by Adib-

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<sup>68</sup>Fred Halliday, 'Iranian Foreign Policy since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Revolution', in Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, (eds.) *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 90

<sup>69</sup>Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Discourse and Violence: The Friend Enemy Conjunction in Contemporary Iranian-American Relations', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol.2, No.3 (2009), p. 517

<sup>70</sup>Ali M. Ansari, 'Cultural Transmutation: The Dialectics of Globalisation in Contemporary Iran', in Toby Dodge and Richard Higgott (eds.), *Globalisation and the Middle East, Islam, Economy, Society and Politics* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs Middle East Programme, 2002), p. 96

<sup>71</sup>Elham Gheytanci, 'A Revolutionary Tradition: Shoars in Iranian Street Politics', *Words without Borders*, (2009)

<sup>72</sup>See, Henner Fürtig, 'Universalist Counter-Projection: Iranian Post-Revolutionary Foreign Policy and Globalisation', in Katia Füllberg-Stollberg, Petra Heidrich and Ellinor Schöne (eds.), *Dissociation and Appropriation: Responses to Globalization in Asia and Africa* (Berlin, Boston: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2021); Peter Seeberg, 'The Iranian Revolution, 1977-79: Interaction and Transformation', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.41, No.4 (2014)

Moghaddam, ‘the more international society turned against Iran, the more it confirmed the self-perception of the Iranian state as the leader of an oppressed nation.’<sup>73</sup> In the IRI’s narrative, the West, therefore, is not a geographical entity but an expression of power and dominance, a specific configuration of the international system that, before the 1979 Revolution, embedded Iran and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic isolated the country. Consequently, post-Revolutionary Iran has a non-Western character that reflects its self-projected *otherness* in respect of the dominant configuration of power within the international community.

Therefore, those revolutionary ideals shape the ideational framework of the IRI’s external projection. According to Firooz-Abadi, Iran’s foreign policy discourse is based on three cardinal principles: Islamism, Third-Worldism, and the quest for justice.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, those principles reflect Iran’s revisionist attitude towards the international system.<sup>75</sup> Although this romantic attitude is tempered by the pragmatism that became dominant after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>76</sup>, Iran’s self-projected *otherness* remains crucial. Arguably, the IRI’s preferred international partners are those who manifest the same dissatisfaction with the actual configuration of the international system.

### **The ego/alter encounter in Sino-Iranian relations**

In what remains the most important work on the China-Iran relationship, John Garver identifies the spirit of Sino-Iranian relations in the civilisational solidarity, defining it as the ‘worldview and state of mind used to frame relationships.’<sup>77</sup> What Garver acknowledges, therefore, is the existence of a narrative that sustains Sino-Iranian relations besides material interests. However, Garver himself clarifies that this shared narrative does not drive policymaking.<sup>78</sup> Otherwise, civilisational solidarity sets the vocabulary that empowers policymaking, providing Chinese and Iranian policymakers with a basket of symbols, memories, ideas and common

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<sup>73</sup>Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26

<sup>74</sup>Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, ‘The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ideal International System’, in Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Reza Molavi (eds.), *Iran and the International System*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 56

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>76</sup>Seeberg, ‘The Iranian Revolution’, p. X

<sup>77</sup>Garver, *China and Iran*, pp. 3-4

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5

sentiments used to sustain their partnership. Arguably, the PRC benefits the most from this narrative. Indeed, it serves as a powerful and flexible tool to mitigate the impact of Beijing's backlashes in its relationship with Tehran. In other words, civilisational solidarity locates Sino-Iranian relations at a higher level in which material interests are not necessarily at the centre of the partnership. The fact that this collides with reality confirms the importance of the narrative itself, which has survived forty years of seesawing Sino-Iranian relations.

Civilisational solidarity is based on two interconnected sub-narratives. The first one is that of China and Iran's rich, millenary history. The other builds upon the two countries' national humiliation and non-Western nature. China and Iran share a vibrant past, of which the apex was reached when the Persian and Chinese empires got in contact through the ancient Silk Road. Notably, 'the two countries have no history of war and conflict,'<sup>79</sup> a *quasi-unicum* that is per se sufficient to portray Sino-Iranian relations as an ancient friendship. An apparent reference to this legendary past was at the core of Xi Jinping's signed article published in an Iranian newspaper ahead of his first visit to Iran in January 2016. Talking about Iran, Xi declared that 'like many other Chinese, [he does] not feel like a stranger in your ancient and beautiful country, thanks to the Silk Road that links out two great nations for centuries.'<sup>80</sup> The pompous tone adopted by the Chinese president had its climax when the article declared that China and Iran made historical contributions to the connectivity between Western and Eastern civilisations. Two aspects should be noted. First, Xi Jinping's trip to Iran coincided with the signature of the Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The article, therefore, proves China's interest in sustaining its practical interests in cooperating with Iran through a constant reference to civilisational solidarity. Secondly, the exaltation of a past in which China and Iran were both glorious empires appear to be in direct contrast with a present in which a clear imbalance of power exists between the two countries.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Manochehr Dorraj and Carrie L. Currier, 'Lubricated with Oil: Iran-China Relations in a Changing World', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.15, No.2 (2008), p. 66

<sup>80</sup>Xi Jinping, 'Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Iran Relations', *Beijing Review*, 21 January 2016. [http://www.bjreview.com/Documents/201601/t20160122\\_800047471.html](http://www.bjreview.com/Documents/201601/t20160122_800047471.html)

<sup>81</sup>Jacopo Scita, 'Has the Pomegranate finally Blossomed? Sino-Iranian Relations Three Years after Xi visit to Tehran', *Global Policy*, 23 January 2019. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/23/01/2019/has-pomegranate-finally-blossomed-sino->



The establishment of diplomatic relations between Beijing and Tehran dates back to 1971. Interestingly, this first modern diplomatic encounter between the two countries happened amid the US-China rapprochement. On the occasion of the visit of Princess Ashraf, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai welcomed the Iranian delegation remarking ‘the ancient ties between the two countries and the bringing low of both great countries by “foreign aggression.”’<sup>82</sup> Except that this first encounter happened between the PRC and Imperial Iran, it already set the tone and narrative that dominated the PRC-IRI relations since 1979. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between Beijing and Tehran grew in quality and intensity after the 1979 Revolution, when Iran’s regional and global isolation became particularly attractive to China. At the same time, the Revolution brought into Iran’s national narrative those concepts of *otherness* and rejection of foreign domination that perfectly fit with the PRC’s historical narrative. According to Garver, ‘both Mao and Khomeini envisioned their nations as providing the model, correct guidance, and support for a revolution against the unjust, Western-dominated, and Western-created international order.’<sup>83</sup> The West, therefore, became the negative *other* through which China and Iran identified themselves and their relationship. The narrative has its distinctive flow. As ancient, rich civilisations, China and Iran used to play a central role in pre-modern global history, connecting the West and the East along the Silk Road. However, for both nations, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been a century of national humiliation perpetrated by Western powers, which aggressed China and Iran, excluding them from the definition of the current international order. Therefore, Iran fits within China’s national humiliation narrative<sup>84</sup>, while the revolutionary momentum brought into the international community by the two countries is idealised as a chance to overthrow Western dominance.

The conceptualisation of the non-Western character of Sino-Iranian relations is sufficiently broad and encompassing to overcome the clear ideological difference between the Iranian and Chinese vanguards. Indeed, while Mao Zedong’s Revolution established the Communist People’s Republic, the outcome

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[iranian-relations-three-years-after-xi-visit?fbclid=IwAR13pDNzASsC5tH\\_Ju8Su6Jula01A5M18PePe435wyp32\\_hV1AvuWGpPtM](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351111111/figure/fig/1/figure-fig1/1511111111111/iranian-relations-three-years-after-xi-visit?fbclid=IwAR13pDNzASsC5tH_Ju8Su6Jula01A5M18PePe435wyp32_hV1AvuWGpPtM)

<sup>82</sup>Garver, China and Iran, p. 9

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 13

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 5

of the 1979 Revolution was the success of the Khomeinist faction, which radically took possession of the composite revolutionary impetus, ultimately establishing a theocratic regime. Only the definition of a common target, vague enough to overcome the differences but clear enough to appeal to the revolutionary zest of both countries, could create a solid narrative. Arguably, before being Communist-Maoist and Islamic-Khomeinist, the PRC and the IRI are built upon the rejection of domestic foreign domination and a revisionist attitude towards the Western-led international order. Therefore, the common ground is that of being united in being *other* in respect of the West. China identifies Iran as part of its ‘struggle to blot out and overcome its putative national humiliation.’<sup>85</sup> This position is reinforced by referencing the glorious past of both countries – two former empires whose primacy has been material but also intellectual and cultural. This vision of Iran as a country with a similar historical experience and comparable dissatisfaction with the power configuration of the Western-led international order informs China’s narrative towards the IRI. As Garver notes, Chinese analysts and politicians have repeatedly acknowledged Iran’s power and importance. Announcing the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, a Beijing radio broadcast defined the country as a shield against the expansionism of the USSR and the strategic dominator of the ‘[b]ottleneck of the Strait of Hormuz... thus controlling the West’s major petroleum giveaways.’<sup>86</sup>

Despite two discrete positions about China and the Chinese involvement in the Iranian economy among the contemporary Iranian political elites,<sup>87</sup> the IRI’s attitude towards the PRC seems complex but responsive to the civilisational solidarity narrative adopted by Beijing. For instance, Iranian reformists – critical of China’s reluctance to establish long-term strategic links – acknowledge that the PRC views Iran as ‘a powerful political and strategic actor in the hearth of the Middle East.’<sup>88</sup> Vice versa, Iran’s conservatives have put much stress on the

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<sup>85</sup>Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 5

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18

<sup>87</sup>In their paper, Ehteshami, Horesh, and Xu analyse the position of the two major camps within Iranian politics, the conservatives and the reformists, towards China. According to the authors, the former appears to be more prone to consider Beijing a reliable and consistent partner, while the latter acknowledges China’s pragmatic, often unsatisfactory cooperation with Iran. See, Anoushiravan Ehteshami et al., ‘Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions’, *The China Journal*, Vol.79 (2018)

<sup>88</sup>Ehteshami et al., ‘Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions,’ p. 3

civilisational links and, generally, have shown higher trust in the possibility of deepening Sino-Iranian relations.<sup>89</sup> Recently, both the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif have expressed interesting declarations that mirror and directly appeal to China's narrative. During a meeting with Xi Jinping ahead of the 2019 summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO), Rouhani 'noted that the U.S. administration's pressure against Iran and China aimed at dominating the world.'<sup>90</sup> Two months later, before visiting China, Zarif published an op-ed in a Chinese newspaper – a practice traditionally associated with Xi Jinping. The Iranian FM declared that when he travels to the PRC, he is

Participating in a millennia-old ritual between two great civilisations. [That is because] China and Iran share a vision of sovereign states with independent foreign policies across the Asian continent being connected, prospering together and realising their potential and their true place in the world.<sup>91</sup>

### **Dyads & triads: the external intervening variables**

One of the fundamental premises of role theory is that international roles do not reflect the self-projected identity of the state that seeks a specific role. Conversely, international roles are the product of interaction. While Malici and Walkers developed their theory based on the "Theory of Moves" designed by Steven Brams,<sup>92</sup> the concept of dyad – a structure of interaction formed by two parts – can be operationalised beyond this specific theoretical model to catch the ego/alter interaction that ultimately generates international roles. In this thesis, the primary dyad explored emerges from the encounter between China and Iran. Other dyads – which will be identified as secondary or intervening in this work – are those formed by (1) China and Iraq, (2) China and Saudi Arabia, (3) China and the US, and, lastly, (4) China and the NAM/Developing countries.

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., pp. 4-5

<sup>90</sup>'Rouhani says Iran, China's resistance against U.S. unilateralism benefits the world', *Tehran Times*, 14 June 2019. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/436956/Rouhani-says-Iran-China-s-resistance-against-U-S-unilateralism>

<sup>91</sup>'FM Zarif says shared vision binds Iran-China', *IRNA*, 25 August 2019.

<https://en.irna.ir/news/83450928/FM-Zarif-says-shared-vision-binds-Iran-China-relations>

<sup>92</sup>Malici and Walker, *Role Theory*, p. 17

The other fundamental premise of role theory is that international roles do not develop and exist in a vacuum. Still, they are part of and affected by the relational context in which they are embedded. Accordingly, the model adopted in this work to analyse China's role-taking and role enactment vis-à-vis Iran takes into account four triads that include the Sino-Iranian dyad:

- The China-Iran-Iraq triad has at its structural apex China (Great Power) and its lower vertices Iran and Iraq (Middle Powers).
- The China-Iran-Saudi Arabia triad has at its structural apex China (Great Power) and its lower vertices Iran and Saudi Arabia (Middle Powers).
- The China-US-Iran triad has at its two structural apexes China and the US (Great Powers), and at its lower vertex Iran.
- The China-Iran-Developing Countries triad has China at its apex, with Iran and the other developing countries at the lower vertices.

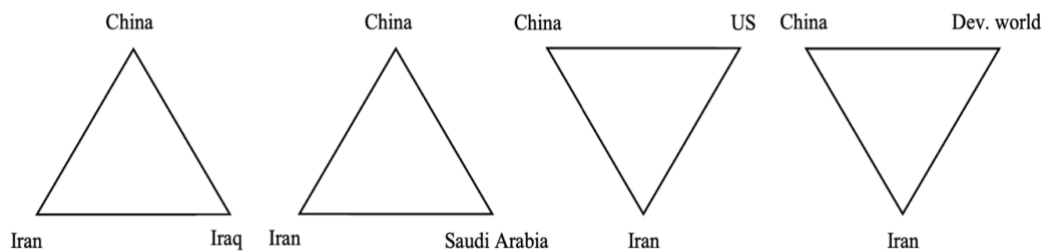


FIGURE 1.5: THE FOUR TRIADS GENERATED BY THE MAIN EXTERNAL INTERVENING DYADS

### The intervening dyads and triads: the structural framework

Specific external dyads and triads inform each dimension. Admittedly, the number of external interactions that affect the development of the two dimensions of role-taking and role enactment is potentially unlimited.<sup>93</sup> However, this work considers

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<sup>93</sup>International roles are the product of social interactions between actors – namely states and international organisations. However, bilateral interactions do not exist in a vacuum. Still, they are affected by the whole spectrum of interactions that the actors involved in the role-taking and role

the dyads and triads that, because of their structural and ideational importance, represent the main external variables in the definition of China's role-taking and role-enactment in Sino-Iranian relations. The main dyads that intervene on the structural dimension – the Great Power-Middle Power framework – of the Chinese role vis-à-vis Iran are the following:

- The China-Iraq and the China-Saudi Arabia dyads are the fundamental dyads that intervene at the regional level. Indeed, the ego/alter expectations that define China's role vis-à-vis Iran are impacted, at different levels through history, by the former's relationships with Iraq and the KSA. Generally speaking, Beijing has historically developed good relations with Baghdad and Riyadh. The influence of Sino-Iraqi relations is particularly evident during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-8). Vice versa, the PRC-KSA partnership impacts the sphere of energy relations and stability in the Persian Gulf.
- The China-US dyad intervenes at the global level. Since the end of the Cold War, China has gradually become the leading global competitor of the United States. Beijing's ascent to great power status has been fundamentally defined by cooperation and competition with Washington. Therefore, due to its global importance, this is a first-tier relationship for China.

The abovementioned dyads are, for their part, constitutive of international roles taken and enacted by China. Their impact is here understood as structural because they interplay with the Great Power-Middle Power nature of the relationship between China and Iran. The related triads represent this interplay. The Iraq-Iran war represents a constitutive passage of China's *role* in the emerging partnership with the IRI, indicating that Beijing was keen to help Tehran overcome international isolation while also presenting Iran with this partnership's inherent limits. Regarding the China-Iran-Saudi Arabia triad, the long-lasting rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh is counterposed to Beijing's desire to build good relations with both countries. Generally speaking, due to the middle power status of Iran and Saudi

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enactment have outside this process. It is apparent, though, that not all the external interactions have the same degree of influence on the main dyad.

Arabia, their leverage vis-à-vis China is limited, both directly and in an attempt to affect Beijing's policies towards the rival. Iran has even less leverage within the China-US-Iran triad. Given that the dyad formed by Beijing and Washington has the fundamental characteristic of representing the relationship between two Great Powers, Tehran's structural position in the related triad is almost automatically relegated to a lower tier – defined by being the inferior vertex of the triangle. A further problematic element is the contrasting nature of the relationships between Iran and China and Iran and the US. Indeed, while the former could be addressed as a partnership, the latter has been characterised by long-lasting political and ideological enmity and security tensions.

### **The intervening dyads and triads: the ideational dimension**

The main dyads that intervene in the ideational dimension of China's role in the partnership with Iran are the following:

- The China-NAM/developing countries dyads, within which the Chinese global discourse towards countries that have been victims of and rejected colonialism and imperialism takes shape. The constitutive element of this dyad is the PRC's anti-hegemonic discourse.
- The China-US dyad, especially after the end of the Cold War, constitutes China's primary area of ideological competition. While the structural impact of this dyad at the global level is predominant, the ideational dimension intervenes in the definition of China's *otherness* in respect of the leading global competitor. In shaping China's international identity, this dyad could be enlarged and generalised to address the juxtaposition between China and the West. Nonetheless, the United States does not only represent a point of negative reference (*what we are not*). In fact, Washington has influenced Beijing's conception of *great powerness*, attaching to it the attribute of international responsibility.

How these external dyads interact with China's role-taking and role enactment vis-à-vis Iran is contrasting. Indeed, Iran is an active part of the developing world, so the derived triad reflects what can be addressed as a test of coherence. In other

words, the Chinese discourse towards Iran is likely to be coherent with the general discourse adopted by Beijing towards the Non-aligned/developing world. If the two discourses are inconsistent with each other – and therefore, China’s broader role vis-à-vis the NAM/developing countries diverges substantially from that enacted in the relationship with Iran – an inter-role conflict could emerge. Instead, the China-US-Iran triad is where China and Iran build their *otherness* in respect of the dominant great power, which embodies the power configuration of the contemporary international system. The revisionist discourse that ideally brings together China and Iran is built within this triad. Yet, as described in the thesis, this triad is a critical source of intra-role tensions.

## **The structural dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations**

The present chapter presents the structural dimension of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran. With the ideational dimension that is reconstructed in Chapter 3, it constitutes one of two components of the interaction model developed and adopted in this thesis. As suggested by its name, the structural framework captures the inherent structure of inter-state relations within which a *role* is taken and performed. In the case of China-Iran relations, the structure is defined by an apparent asymmetry in the distribution of power, which is reflected in the different ranks to which the PRC and the IRI belong: the former is a great power, the latter is a middle power. The perimeter dictated by the asymmetrical distribution of power is a constitutive element of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran. In the words of Malici and Walker, it corresponds to *The World as It Is* – a dry-yet-self-explanatory label that captures the structural boundaries dictated by the distribution of power. Material interests and policies are pursued within these boundaries. Therefore, one of the main features of the structural dimension here described is its rigidity. In normal circumstances, the distribution of power between two defined actors - *The World as It Is*, indeed – remains constant and predictable, even more so when, as in the case of China-Iran relations, one actor significantly ranks above the other in terms of relative and absolute economic, political, and military capabilities.

### **Chapter outline**

First, the Chapter briefly defines China and Iran as great and middle powers. Such a preliminary step is necessary to move toward the analysis of the great power-middle power framework, which constitutes the core of this Chapter and the structural component of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations. Then, the Chapter delves into defining Iran's attractiveness to China, presenting three clusters that represent the critical areas of Chinese interests toward Iran: energy and economic cooperation, security and defence cooperation, and strategic interests. These



interests, which reflect a remarkable complementarity between the PRC and the IRI, are the primary driver of Sino-Iranian relations. Yet, as will be explained, they present an additional element of asymmetry. Two critical external intervening variables are then presented: China's relations with Saudi Arabia – another great power-middle power partnership unfolding in the same sub-region – and the United States. From the Chinese standpoint, the latter is unquestionably located above the partnership with Iran, adding to the development of Sino-Iranian relations a further layer of asymmetry. Ultimately, the structural dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations is interest-driven and strongly defined by asymmetry.

### **China as great power**

In a celebrated 1993 article, Kenneth Waltz stated that the rank of power depends on combining a precise set of characteristics. Those are the 'size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence.'<sup>94</sup> Among Waltz's features, prominent realists have put much stress on the military capabilities, adding that, in the nuclear age, the possession of a nuclear deterrent is a necessary feature of great powers.<sup>95</sup> The compresence of these features determines the apical positioning of a state in the power hierarchy of the international system<sup>96</sup>. Broadly speaking, as stated by Conduit and Akbarzadeh,<sup>97</sup> Mearsheimer's definition of great power appears sufficient to consider China as part of this category:

To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world. The candidate need not to have the capability to defeat the leading state, but it must have some reasonable prospect of turning the conflict into a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state seriously weakened, even if that dominant state ultimately wins the war. In the nuclear age great powers must have a nuclear deterrent.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security*, Vol.18, No.2 (1993), p. 50

<sup>95</sup>John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 5

<sup>96</sup>Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 8

<sup>97</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 'Great Power-Middle Power', p. 469

<sup>98</sup>Mearsheimer, 'The Tragedy', p. 5

Yet, the question of qualifying China as a great power is worth a more profound assessment. This thesis explores three and a half decades in which the international system has faced significant changes in the distribution of power – of which China has been one of the protagonists. The definition of great power adopted in this thesis – and more specifically in the definition of the great power-middle power framework that constitutes the material dimension of the model – can be ascribed to the realist tradition. In other words, here, the question of China’s “great powerness” is mainly a matter of absolute and relative material capabilities. Nonetheless, capabilities in all their forms are not necessarily stable but change over time – as does the distribution of power within the international system. In 1980, Gerald Segal argued that the first significant signs of China’s emergence as a “third great power” in the bipolar equation of the Cold War could be seen in the 1961 Laos crisis, in which China had been critically involved in the negotiations with the other great powers, testifying the emergence of its new international status.<sup>99</sup> So, when three years later it successfully tested its first nuclear weapon, the PRC added the most defining military capability to a status that was already apparent. Despite that, during the Cold War era, China remained substantially second-ranked vis-à-vis the two superpowers. However, its economic rise and still unexpressed potential attracted the international attention typically given to the countries that occupy the highest positions in the global hierarchy of power. For instance, in 1988, Nixon declared that China would become a world-leading power, given ‘the potential of a billion of the ablest people in the world will inevitably make China into an economic giant and also a military giant.’<sup>100</sup> On their side, from the 1990s and even more so since the early 2000s, Chinese scholars and leaders have shown an increasing self-awareness of China’s “great powerness,” although often mitigated and somehow hidden by attached attributes such as “responsible”, “new-type”, and “rising.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Gerald Segal, ‘China and the Great Power Triangle’, *The China Quarterly*, No.83 (1980), p. 492

<sup>100</sup> As quoted in Gregory D. Foster, ‘China as a Great Power: from Red Menace to Green Giant?’ *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol.34, No.2 (2001), p. 160

<sup>101</sup> For comprehensive reviews see, See-Won Byum, ‘China’s Major-Powers Discourse in the Xi Jinping Era: Tragedy of Great Power Politics Revisited?’, *Asian Perspective*, Vol.40, No.30 (2016), pp. 493-522; Qui Hao, ‘China Debates the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations’’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.8, No.4 (2015), pp. 349-370

External recognition and domestic awareness have resulted from China's intrinsic material attributes (the fourth largest and the most populated country in the world, above all) and impressive economic growth since the 1970s, which brought China to become the second-largest economy in the world in 2010. In 1997, Francis Lees went to the point of predicting that:

Greater China (including Hong Kong) will attain superpower status early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, based on its strategic geographic position in the Eurasian land mass, possession of a large conventional military force, a large national economy and nuclear weapon capability.<sup>102</sup>

As posited by G.D. Foster, China meets these criteria.<sup>103</sup> In any case, whether or not the PRC has reached the superpower status 25 years after Lees' prediction, the more modest ambition of being a great power in pure positional and material terms were met long before. Overall, the main element that should emerge from establishing China's "great powerness" is locating the PRC in a category of countries clearly above the one to which Iran belongs. This asymmetry was already apparent in 1979 and grew progressively over time. The following section defines the Islamic Republic as a middle power.

### **Iran as middle power**

Reaching a consensus on the definition of the concept of "middle power" has proved to be a tormented yet unresolved issue, perhaps even more than in the case of great power. The literature has attempted to conceptualise middle powers using hierarchical, functional, behavioural, rhetorical, and even Role Theory approaches.<sup>104</sup> As Gilley and O'Neil point out, 'positional, or material, capabilities approaches are the natural departure point for defining middle powers.'<sup>105</sup>

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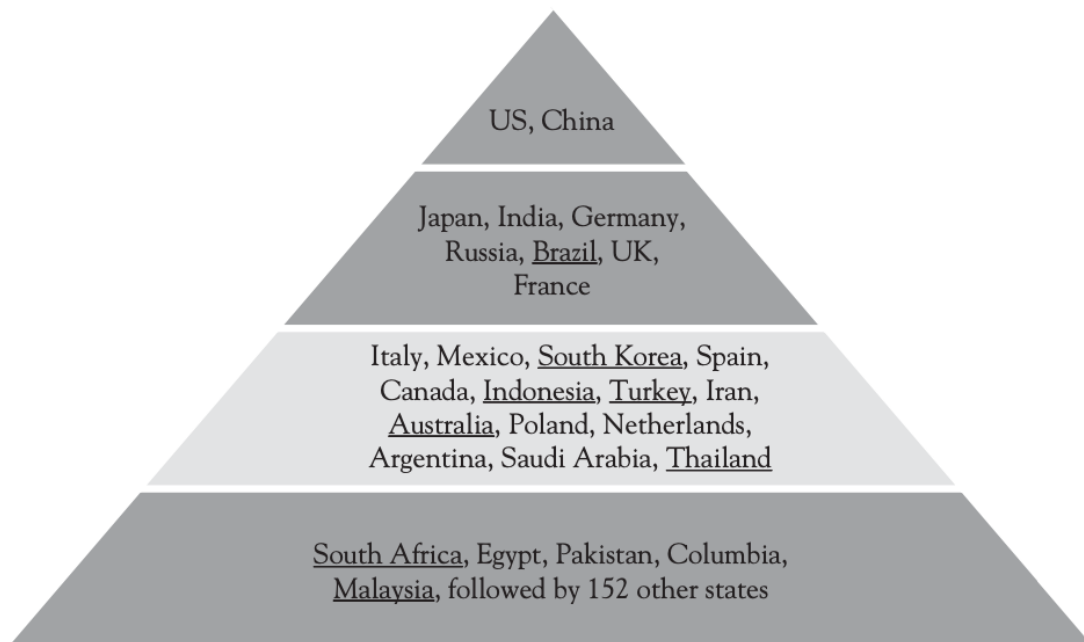
<sup>102</sup> Francis A. Lee, *China Superpower: Requisites for High Growth* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1997), pp. 39-40

<sup>103</sup> Foster, 'China as a Great Power', p. 162

<sup>104</sup> Cameron G. Thies and Angguntari C. Sari, 'A Role Theory Approach to Middle Powers: Making Sense of Indonesia's Place in the International System', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2018), p. 399

<sup>105</sup> Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neill, 'China's Rise through the Prism of Middle Powers', in Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neill, (eds.), *Middle Powers and the Rise of China* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2014), p. 4

Therefore, for defining great power, the approach selected is, as in the case of great power, the hierarchical one, which refers to the possession of significant material capabilities that stand out compared to other states in the regional system of reference but do not match those of great powers. If the fundamental feature of great powers is that of being global actors – possessing enough material resources to influence the international system – middle powers, otherwise, are eminently regional actors. However, since middle powers are key actors in their regional systems, their behaviour within their reference system mimics that of Great Powers vis-à-vis the international system.<sup>106</sup>



**FIGURE 2.1: THE MIDDLE POWER LEVEL USING CLUSTER ANALYSIS BY GILL AND O'NEILL (2014)**

Gill and O'Neill present a four-tier representation of the power hierarchy of states, derived from a mean-based cluster analysis that uses economic size as the indicator. The result is a pyramidal configuration (figure 2.1) in which the apex is occupied by the United States and China, followed by six other great powers. The third tier is the most representative of middle powers and includes Iran.<sup>107</sup> Overall, Shi Dong-min's definition of middle power successfully captures how the possession of

<sup>106</sup>Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, Syria and Iran, p. 7

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 5

middling capabilities is reflected in the possibility of defending itself from the other actors in its regional system:

A state actor that has restricted influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and to defend its own position on matters related to the security affairs of the region to which it belongs.<sup>108</sup>

The literature generally agrees that Iran appears to have middle powers' structural and hierarchical features. Its territorial extension and population, the size and structure of its economy, and conventional military capabilities stand out compared to the other regional countries, allowing Iran to project power and influence in its own region.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, Iran appears to be powerful enough to claim a role of prominence within the Middle East credibly, and even more so in its sub-regional system of reference – the Persian Gulf –and 'to resist a coalition of other regional states against [it].'<sup>110</sup> As summarised by Luciano Zaccara, after the 1979 Revolution, several scholars have adopted alternative approaches to conclude that Iran is a middle power. For instance, Zaccara points toward Ramazani's 1983 work, in which he argues that Iran's role as middle power remained constant despite the passage from the Shah Reza Pahlavi era to the Islamic Republic. Zaccara's comparison of critical current statistical data from Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia confirms Brigid Starkey's 1991's conclusion that the IRI has to be classified as a middle power in the Middle East<sup>111</sup>. Furthermore, both Buzan and Wæver and Ehteshami and Hinnebusch agree to grant Iran a role of regional prominence – describing it either as regional or middle power.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, at least from a structural and positional perspective, Iran qualifies as a middle power.

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<sup>108</sup> Dong-min Shin, 'The Concept of Middle Power and the Case of the ROK: A Review', in Rudiger Frank, et al. (eds.), *Korea 2021: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 148

<sup>109</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 'Great Power-Middle Power', p. 469

<sup>110</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, p. 7

<sup>111</sup> Luciano Zaccara, 'Iran's Permanent Quest for Regional Power Status,' in Jaqueline Anne Braveboy-Wagner, (ed), *Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in the Global South* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan)

<sup>112</sup> See, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Power: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 34; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, p. 7

Noteworthy, describing Iran as regional power – as Buzan and Wæver do in *Regions and Powers* – opens up an interesting perspective. From a system-level perspective, Iran is a second-tier power. In its region, though, the IRI is at the apex of the hierarchy of power and capabilities, and thus it influences the “securitisations processes” of the Persian Gulf. Nonetheless, given its relative prominence, regional powers ‘may of course get caught up in global power rivalries.’<sup>113</sup> The Islamic Republic, given its rather tumultuous genesis and subsequent history, seems particularly prone – if not intrinsically bound – to have a confrontational encounter with the extra-regional major power that has the deepest penetration in the Persian Gulf – the United States. Such a reality reverberates in China’s relationship with Iran.

### **The great power-middle power framework**

Established that, for the purpose and timeframe explored in this thesis, the PRC is categorised as a great power while Iran is a middle or regional power, it is evident that the asymmetrical distribution of power fundamentally defines the relationship between the two. Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh described China-Iran relations as an archetypical great power-middle power partnership. According to the two scholars,

Intra-relationship asymmetry is a defining feature of great power-middle power relationships because the military, diplomatic and economic imbalance between the two partners is so vast. This asymmetry has significant consequences for the shape of such relationships because it frequently manifests as middle power dependence on the more powerful partner.<sup>114</sup>

Quoting the work of Michael Mandelbaum,<sup>115</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh point toward the Iranian leaders’ hesitation to publicly criticise China as a manifestation of the ‘intra-partnership security dilemma’ faced by the middle power, which may fear the abandonment of the great power.<sup>116</sup> As further argued in this Chapter, the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>114</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh, ‘Great Power-Middle Power’, p. 470

<sup>115</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 101.

<sup>116</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh, ‘Great Power-Middle Power’, p. 471

intra-partnership security dilemma faced by Iranian leaders when dealing with China is amplified by the surplus of asymmetry generated by the IRI's international isolation, which makes the partnership with the PRC substantially irreplaceable.

Great powers have a global projection: they are powerful and resourceful enough to compete and challenge their equivalents and create systems of alliances or partnerships that reflect their own interests. Vice versa, the middle powers' range of action is more limited, their material capabilities are especially relevant at the regional level, and their relationship with the great powers is ambiguous. Middle powers might find in great powers a way to avoid diplomatic isolation and increase their security vis-à-vis another hostile great power. At the same time, 'regional middle powers typically see great powers' penetration and regulation as threatening to their sovereignty.'<sup>117</sup> From the great powers' point of view, establishing a partnership with a middle power appears to be particularly appealing because the asymmetry in material capabilities and resources limits the potential of a direct threat from the weaker partner.<sup>118</sup> However, the regional influence and prominence often held by middle powers offer great powers a range of benefits. Firstly, middle powers might work as bulwarks against the regional penetration of other great powers. Secondly, creating links and security arrangements involving the leading regional actors is a necessary feature of great powers' regional strategies. Thirdly, "client states" may be crucial to great power's own security, even if the former is not geographically located in proximity to the latter.<sup>119</sup> Lastly, middle powers are first-tier, regional pivots of great powers' global projection. Therefore, great and middle powers are naturally interested in cooperating, whether in the form of non-, semi-, or fully-institutionalised partnerships or alliances. However, mutual interests do not fully compensate for power asymmetry: great power-middle power relationships are inherently unbalanced, although the conduct of their relations, the perceived strategic value of specific middle powers, or the (unique) resources they can provide to the great power could temper such asymmetry. In their seminal work on interdependence, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye note that 'it is asymmetries

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 7

<sup>118</sup>Enrico Fels, *Shifting power in Asia Pacific? The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), p. 216

<sup>119</sup>Sulmaan Khan, 'Unbalanced Alliances: Why China hasn't reined in North Korea', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 February 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-02-18/unbalanced-alliances>

in dependence that are most likely to provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another.<sup>120</sup> As true as this might be, it also that, as Conduit and Akbarzadeh rightly state, ‘it is important however to not overestimate the extent to which great powers can shape the behaviour of their partners.’<sup>121</sup> Rather than directly affecting the conduct of the weaker party, power imbalance defines the expectations, limits, and objectives of the partnership itself.

Although effective in capturing the asymmetry in the distribution of power between China and Iran, the great power-middle power framework does not provide a contextual measurement of the relative distance between the two actors. In other words, while the framework is general and generally applicable to the bilateral relationships involving great powers and middle powers, representing the absolute asymmetry of power, capabilities, and systemic conditions between two actors belonging to different tiers, the PRC-IRI relationship has its own particular manifestation of this distribution. Specifically, two elements define the great power-middle power framework's distinctive form in Sino-Iranian relations: Iran’s regional power status and international isolation. The former is an asymmetry reducer, while the latter multiplies it. As explained in the next section of this Chapter, the IRI’s regional prominence and ability to influence the security landscape of the Persian Gulf attracts the strategic interests of every major external power that aims at penetrating the region – China included. When the PRC deals with Iran, it deals with a regional power that is an inevitable component of its broader strategy to gain influence and project power in the Persian Gulf. In absolute terms, therefore, the China-Iran relationship has the shape of an archetypical great power-middle power relationship. Still, in the regional context, such asymmetry appears mitigated by Iran’s apical place in the Persian Gulf’s hierarchy of power, capabilities, and political weight. Consequently, on one side, the PRC is pushed to build a partnership with the IRI because of luring bilateral interests and opportunities. On the other, considerations of Iran’s regional role are equally if not more critical drivers of Beijing’s engagement with Tehran.

If regional power status could increase Iran’s leverage within its relations with China, its international isolation works in the opposite direction, amplifying

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<sup>120</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), p. 11

<sup>121</sup> Conduit and Akbarzadeh, ‘Great Power-Middle Power’, p. 471



power asymmetry. After the 1979 Revolution, ideationally – as discussed in Chapter 3 – and more so practically, China turned into the IRI’s main major power option, thanks to the mix of the attractiveness of its spectacular economic growth, the will to expand multi-layered cooperation with Tehran, a shared degree of dissatisfaction toward the Western-led international system, and a significantly minor historical burden than Russia. Yet, one of the main drivers of Iran’s Eastward turn has long been its ideological isolation from the West and – to a various degree over time – the external barriers to access the international markets. Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic has indeed been the subject of a continuum of US and international sanctions, which, within the timeframe explored by this thesis, culminated with the UNSC non-proliferation sanctions imposed between 2006 and 2010. Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai label the ‘multi-layered sanctions regime on Iran’ as a “catalyst” of Tehran’s reach toward China (and Russia).<sup>122</sup> Yet, the compresence of sanction-induced international isolation and the consequent significant reduction of options in terms of constructing relatively stable economic, political, and security relations with great powers, along with the need to find partners possessing the will and capabilities of at least shielding Iran from the impact of sanctions, resulted in Iran’s growing reliance on China. Such dependency has strong reverberances on the degree of asymmetry of the great power-middle power framework. In fact, due to Tehran’s international economic and political isolation, borrowing from economic terminology, China deals with Iran from a position resembling a *quasi-monopolist*, whose leverage grows proportionally to Iran’s inability to access other significant economic, political, and security partners. The result is that, in the case of China-Iran relations, the great power-middle power framework is more asymmetrical than the baseline constituted by the intrinsic asymmetry of this type of bilateral relationship. Overall, the amplifier effect of Iran’s international isolation diminishes the tempering impact of the IRI’s status as regional power.

### **Defining Iran’s attractiveness to China**

The construction, expansion, and consolidation of the partnership between China and Iran are not incidental. Over the years, both countries have nurtured their

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<sup>122</sup> Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, *Triple Axis: Iran’s Relations with Russia and China* (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2018), p. 55

relations to advance their own and mutual interests. For the Islamic Republic, China quickly became the main strategic option to confront the two superpowers during the Cold War and the United States from the 1990s. However, as described in the previous section, this has increased the inherent asymmetry of the great power-middle power relationship, reducing Iran's intra-relationship leverage. Nonetheless, the value of Sino-Iranian ties is not only perceived by Iran.

On the contrary, the IRI has its own attractiveness to the PRC. In fact, echoing Buzan and Wæver, Iran is a "pivot state" in the Persian Gulf: its political, economic, and military strength makes it crucial to China's broader interests in the region.<sup>123</sup> The trajectory of Sino-Iranian relations suggests that Chinese thinkers and policymakers have long been aware that Iran's status as regional power makes it an indispensable encounter when projecting power and influence in the Persian Gulf, routinely publicly acknowledging Iran's strategic importance.<sup>124</sup> Coherently with China's broader diplomatic approach to the region, that encounter has been framed and nourished from a cooperative rather than competitive or adversarial standpoint, favoured by the presence of relevant mutual material and strategic interests and a significant ideational convergence. Yet, the Persian Gulf – and more broadly the Middle East – remains an area of growing-yet-secondary importance for China, making Sino-Iranian relations a second-order relationship.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, the IRI appears trapped in a paradox: it represents a first-tier partner in a region of secondary interest for China.<sup>126</sup> But it also has a non-negligible value in Beijing's competition with the United States, either as an instrument to counter Washington's regional and global influence or as a bargaining chip to reduce the level of confrontation. Still, despite shared interests and an overall relatively consistent trajectory, it would be wrong to portray Sino-Iranian relations as spotless. As briefly described in this Chapter and more broadly in Chapter 5, Iran's troubling regional behaviour and its rivalry with the other Chinese regional partners and the United

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<sup>123</sup> See Sun Degang, 'China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East', in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021)

<sup>124</sup> See, Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 18; Ehteshami et al., 'Chinese-Iranian 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions', pp. 18-25

<sup>125</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 293

<sup>126</sup> While the debate about the place occupied by the Middle East in the hierarchy of the PRC's diplomatic interests is very much ongoing; it is apparent that, since 2016, China has significantly increased the extent, scope, and quality of its engagement with the region.

States have been a source of concern for China.<sup>127</sup> The interplay of these dynamics and the intrinsic nature of the great power-middle power relationship limit what Iran could expect from China. It also dictates how Beijing is keen to spend political, diplomatic, and economic resources to protect Tehran and its relationship with it. Therefore, China's *role* in the partnership with Iran is taken and performed based on this specific configuration of priorities, which contains the spectrum of the PRC's interests in the IRI.

The following sections present three macro areas that capture the overarching complex of those interests. Although profoundly intertwined, these three clusters of interests spread along the whole spectrum generated by the prerogatives of Iran's resources, needs, ambitions, and regional power status. Such spectrum extends from those interests mainly related to China's own domestic development to those that concern the PRC's strategic projection in the Persian Gulf and beyond. The first sphere – which includes energy and broader economic cooperation – is essentially bilateral and domestic-oriented, being constructed on what Iran can offer China as a partner, independently of its regional and global stance, at least in theory. The strategic sphere, otherwise, is located on the opposite side of the spectrum because it contains China's interests in Iran as a component of both its regional strategy in the Persian Gulf and its global competition with the USSR and the United States during the Cold War and Washington alone after 1991. The security and defence sphere sits in a middle ground between the other two. Energy security and counter-terrorism, two drivers of cooperation with Iran, have an inherent regional dimension and are ultimately ascribable to Iran's impact on the stability of the Persian Gulf and the larger Middle East. Defence cooperation works between commercial considerations and more strategic objectives. Lastly, nuclear cooperation, especially in a case such as China-Iran relations, has its own distinctive critical strategic dimension that often outmatches the commercial logic.

### **Energy and economic interests**

Energy and broader economic interests are historically significant drivers of China's cooperation with Iran. Yet, the extent to which they continue representing the main foundation of Sino-Iranian relations is questionable. They certainly backed

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<sup>127</sup>See, Ehteshami et al., 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions', p. 17

the PRC's first engagement with the IRI due to the extraordinary synchronism between China's opening up to the world in 1978 and the quest of a resource-rich, newly established regime – the Islamic Republic – for new, politically akin partners outside the West. Progressively, though, such an impressive overlap seems to have lost part of its momentum and salience. On one side, the economic relationship between China and Iran became somehow more routinary, with practical issues and technical, financial, and commercial difficulties becoming the norm. On the other, the asymmetry in expectations, reliance on the partner, and leverage have become increasingly apparent. The US and international sanctions have reinforced this asymmetrical encounter. International isolation has forced the Iranian economy to be increasingly reliant on China, concurrently establishing significant barriers for the PRC to expand its financial footprint in the country. As a result, the PRC has become the IRI's main trading partner, a dominant position undoubtedly ascribable to China's spectacular rise in the Middle Eastern markets. Still, it also reflects Iran's chronic lack of alternative partners. For instance, the level of Chinese FDIs in the Islamic Republic remains modest, especially compared to the boom of Chinese investment in the other Persian Gulf countries (e.g., UAE and Saudi Arabia).<sup>128</sup> Overall, it would appear unproductive to frame China's interests in Iran solely driven by energy and commercial interests.

### *Energy interests*

Energy represents the backbone of China-Iran relations as they constitute one of the main drivers of the PRC's outreach toward the Persian Gulf. Iran possesses some of the largest fossil fuel reserves in the world. Combining oil and natural gas, Iran's total proven reserves amount to 301.7 billion boe (barrels of oil equivalent – a measure that allows unifying oil and gas), second only to Saudi Arabia by a small margin (302.5 boe) and behind Russia (198.3 boe).<sup>129</sup> As recalled by Dorraj and Currier, what makes Iran unique among most of the other oil-producing countries is the comparatively low extraction rate, which opens up to the possibility of a substantial increase in the production of both oil and gas subject to investment,

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<sup>128</sup> Lucille Greer and Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, 'Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context', *Wilson Center Occasional Paper Series*, No.38 (2020), pp. 8-12

<sup>129</sup> Manochehr Dorraj and Carrie L. Currier, 'Lubricated with Oil: Iran-China Relations in a Changing World, Middle East Policy', Vol.15, No.2 (2008), p. 71

infrastructure modernisation, and an improvement of Iran’s political relations with the world.<sup>130</sup> On its side, from the 1970s, China has constantly increased its demand for hydrocarbons at a pace that reflected its spectacular and seemingly unstoppable economic growth. Between 1993 and 1994, China became a net importer of oil, surpassing the United States as the largest oil importer in 2013.<sup>131</sup>

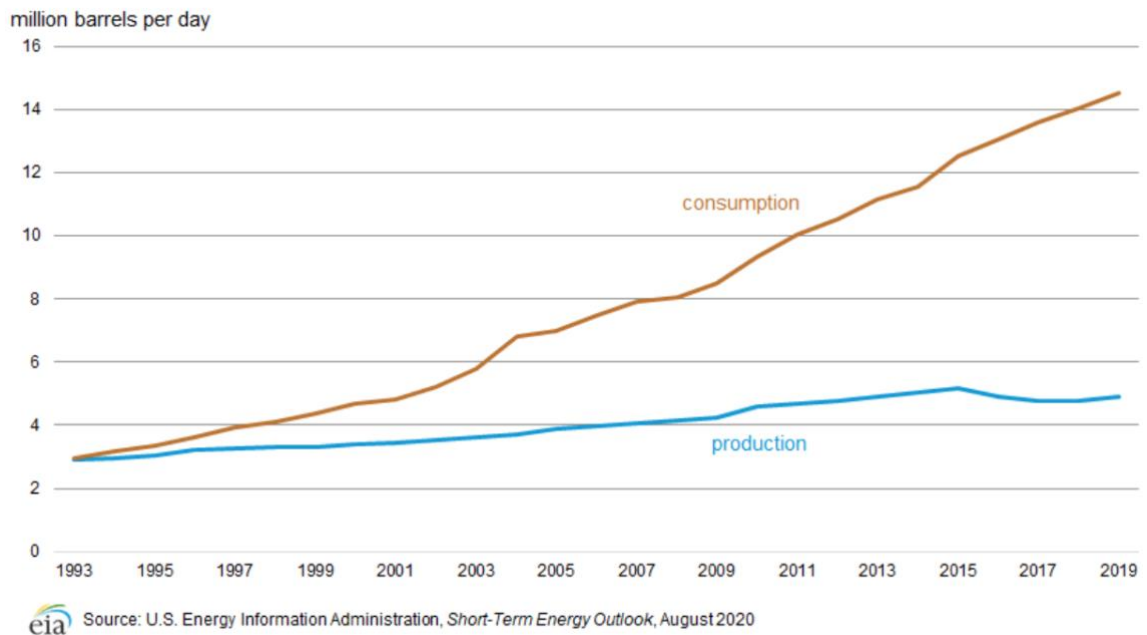


FIGURE 2.2 CHINA'S PETROLEUM AND OTHER LIQUIDS PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION, 1993-2019<sup>132</sup>

Due to its unmatched reserves, the Middle East gained prominence in the PRC’s global strategy, consistently providing ‘between 40 and 50 percent of China’s crude oil imports.’<sup>133</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that in 2008 John Garver and John Alterman described China’s Middle East policy as mainly guided by energy demands – a priority that over ranked every other commercial, security and political interest.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>130</sup> See Dorraj and Currier, ‘Lubricated with Oil’; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, *Triple Axis*, p. 98

<sup>131</sup> China Analysis, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015.

[https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2016/04/f30/China\\_International\\_Analysis\\_US.pdf](https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2016/04/f30/China_International_Analysis_US.pdf)

<sup>132</sup> Country Analysis Executive Summary: China, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2020, p.4. [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/China/china.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/China/china.pdf)

<sup>133</sup> Philip Andrews-Speed and Yao Lixia, ‘China’s Middle East Energy Relations’ in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 234

<sup>134</sup> See Jonathan Fulton, ‘China’s Emergence as a Middle East Power’, in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021)

The apparent convergence between fossil fuel-rich Iran and energy-thirsty China makes the IRI and the PRC almost natural partners. In reality, the relationship has been significantly more complex.<sup>135</sup> After the first pioneering purchases of Iranian oil in 1974, the PRC has dramatically ramped up its oil relationship with the IRI in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War and through the 1990s. As Garver notes, China's growing manifestation of interest in Iran's oil industry in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a direct consequence of its spiking demand for fossil fuels, which since 1993 could not be met by domestic production alone.<sup>136</sup> Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, China and Iran expanded their energy cooperation significantly, signing several deals and agreements<sup>137</sup>, which resulted in Beijing becoming the largest foreign investor in the Iranian energy sector at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, energy relations between Tehran and Beijing have been subject to several political turbulences. As Garver reports, in the aftermath of the Iraq-Iran War, Iranian authorities were sceptical about the quality of Chinese extraction equipment and technology. Chinese reach-out in the early 1990s was met with prudence.<sup>139</sup> To a certain extent, such scepticism on the Iranian side was a reflection of a general trend to prefer – or at least try to keep attracting – European and Japanese companies and eventually create a more competitive market. An example of this diversification attempt was the decision of the Khatami administration to award preferential rights to explore the Azadegan field, which the Islamic Republic discovered in 1999, to Japanese firms rather than to Chinese companies. Contextually, though, Iran awarded CNPC and SINOPEC a series of lucrative explorations and development contracts in oil and gas fields, in what appeared a balancing move aimed at maintaining good relations with Beijing while trying to keep the market open to non-Chinese players.

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<sup>135</sup> An articulated perspective on China's energy relations with Iran could be found in Wu Fuzuo, *China's Puzzling Energy Diplomacy Toward Iran*, *Asian Perspective*, Vol.39 (2015), pp. 47-69

<sup>136</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 265

<sup>137</sup> Major agreements in the energy field include but are not limited to the 1997 general agreement on joint exploration, a shipment of Chinese state-of-the-art oil equipment to Iran in 1998, the 2002 NIOC-SINOPEC agreement to explore oil in Kashan province, and a series of significant oil and gas deals signed in 2004.

<sup>138</sup> John Garver, 'China-Iran Relations: Cautious Friendship with America's Nemesis', *China Report*, Vol.49, No.1 (2013), p. 79

<sup>139</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 267

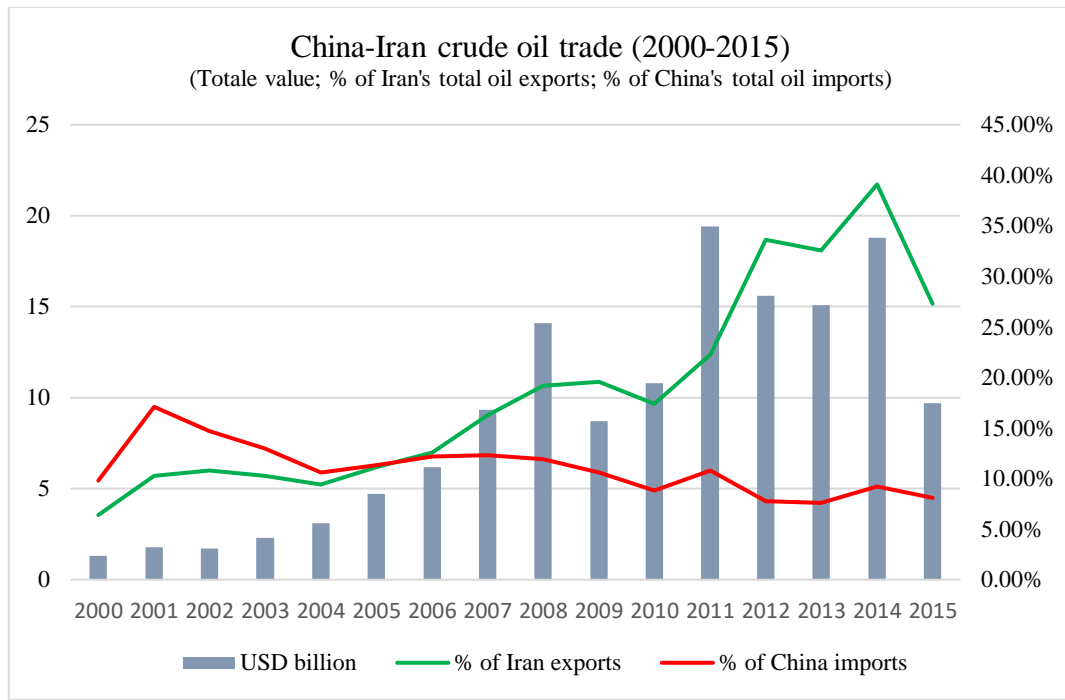


FIGURE 2.3: CHINA-IRAN CRUDE OIL TRADE, 2000-2015<sup>140</sup>

Figure 2.3 shows the value of Chinese imports of Iranian crude oil between 2000 and 2015. Yet the most critical observation is the divergent dependence path between the supplier, Iran, and the customer, China. Until 2004, China consistently accounted for roughly 10% of the total value of Iran’s crude exports. Subsequently, the PRC’s chunk rose steadily after 2010, reaching almost 40% in 2014. At the same time, the portion of Iran’s crude in the Chinese basket progressively stabilised in a region between 8% and 11% of China’s total imports. The comparison is striking as much as telling. While nuclear-related sanctions reduced Iran's customer pool and forced Tehran to rely on China to sell its crude increasingly, the PRC took a diversification path that shielded its energy security from geopolitical risks – whether from Iran, Sudan, or Libya. As a result, the IRI progressively lost its apical position in the Chinese crude market.

Despite some scholars arguing the centrality of energy in Sino-Iranian relations,<sup>141</sup> China’s interest in Iran’s fossil fuels and energy industry should not be overestimated. Indeed, the IRI represents a source of cheap oil and a relevant natural gas supplier, while its in-need-of-modernisation industry offers potentially

<sup>140</sup> Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity: <https://oec.world/>

<sup>141</sup> See, Zahid Khan and Guo Changgang, ‘China’s Energy Driven Initiatives with Iran: Implications for the United States’, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol.11, No.4 (2017), 15-31. The article provides a detailed description of China-Iran energy relations.

attractive investment opportunities. Iran was one of the protagonists of China's "going out" for oil strategy in the 1990s.<sup>142</sup> Yet, from the early 2000s, the PRC has taken a diversification path that has progressively reduced the centrality of Iranian oil in its commodity basket. Overall, the perception of the Sino-Iranian energy connection often appears magnified by the political relevance of oil – which for Iran represents a pillar of its state budget, and the ability to sell oil freely is a sought-after symbol of independence and successful defiance of US-imposed isolation. Although this thesis does not directly examine the post-2015 path of Sino-Iranian relations, it is noteworthy that in the context of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign, China has kept buying small-but-significant quantities of Iranian oil despite the risk of secondary sanctions.<sup>143</sup> Such transactions, often performed via third countries using hiding techniques, appear motivated by security and political consideration rather than China's need to access Iranian crude.

### *Economic interests*

China's non-energy related economic interests in Iran have followed a similar dynamic to the energy connection: a strong complementarity between supply and demand, which over time was subject to a deterioration in the quality of trade and investment caused by Iran's inability to foster competition, mismanagement, and adverse international political pressure. Iran presents a quite diversified and developed economy, with a population that grew from 37 million in 1979 to 86 million in 2020 and is located at the crossroads of the land routes connecting Asia, the Middle East and the wider Mediterranean region. Added to the opportunities related to its international isolation, the IRI is a potentially attractive market for China. As Garver writes,

China's leaders see the large-scale transfer of Chinese industrial technology and machine tools to Iran, under generous terms regarding financing and technology

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<sup>142</sup> Chen Wen-Sheng, 'China's Oil Strategy: "Going Out" to Iran', *Asian Politics & Policy*, Vol.2, No.1 (2010), pp. 39–54

<sup>143</sup> Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, 'China Restarts Purchase of Iranian oil, Bucking Trump's Sanctions', *Bourse and Bazaar*, 17 May 2019  
<https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/5/17/china-restarts-purchases-of-iranian-oil-bucking-trumps-sanctions>



transfer, as laying the basis for a long-term and close, multidimensional partnership based on trust and mutual understanding. Just as China helped Iran in a very practical manner fight its war in the 1980s, so in the post-war period it is assisting Iran, in an equally practical manner, with economic development.<sup>144</sup>

Iran came out of the 1979 Revolution with a growing need to find new trade partners to substitute for the United States and the United Kingdom, which constituted the pillars of Iran's trades during the Shah epoch. Once again, this happened contextually to China's opening up to the world and the consequent boom in its global trade. Similarly, the Iraq-Iran War's reconstruction process turned into an attractive opportunity for Chinese investment and construction firms.<sup>145</sup> In the 2000s, the economic relationship grew mainly due to Iran's need for a strong external partner to overcome the growing isolation caused by the international sanction regime. China, again, seized the opportunity. Yet, the economic relationship has always been far from idyllic. Iranian policymakers and civil society have denounced multiple times both the slow pace at which Chinese projects are delivered, the low quality of Made in China products that, especially during the Ahmadinejad era, flooded the Iranian market, and the occasional trade deficit caused by the lack of diversification in Chinese imports from Iran other than oil.<sup>146</sup> On their sides, Chinese businesspeople and governments official have found difficulties in advancing their economic relationship with Tehran, ranging from the tough negotiating style of their Iranian counterparts to arbitrary contract violations and Iran's occasional difficulties in paying debts.<sup>147</sup> The launch of the BRI in 2013 has given new impulse to Sino-Iranian relations, recentring the focal point of the partnership on Tehran's potential role as a commercial hub and crucial route in China's Westward projection. Nonetheless, the same circumstances that prevented the expansion of Sino-Iranian financial relations have so far impeded the IRI's

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<sup>144</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 280

<sup>145</sup> For instance, in 1991, Iranian President Rafsanjani invited China to bid for the construction of the Tehran metro railway. The project was awarded in 1996 to a Chinese-Iranian conglomerate and completed in 2001. Similarly, in the post-Iraq-Iran War, Chinese companies got involved in various infrastructural and industrial projects in Iran, including but not limited to dams, cement plants, airports, railways, and shipbuilding.

<sup>146</sup> See, Ehteshami, et al, 'Chinese-Iranian 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions'; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, *Triple Axis*, pp. 109-110; Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 297.

<sup>147</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, pp. 278-279

integration into the BRI.<sup>148</sup> Noteworthy, the official view of the Chinese government seems to continue portraying the relationship with Iran as mainly economy-driven, sustaining the idea of a high complementarity between the Chinese and the Iranian economies.<sup>149</sup> Such a view, which reflects China’s typical focus on mutual development and win-win economic cooperation as a driver of its Middle East policy, might assume a more subtle yet significant meaning in the relationship with Iran. To a certain extent, it underplays Iran’s occasional attempts to exaggerate the strategic value of the partnership as an anti-US coalition while also signalling to the PRC’s other regional partners and Washington itself that the relationship with Tehran stops short of a military entente.

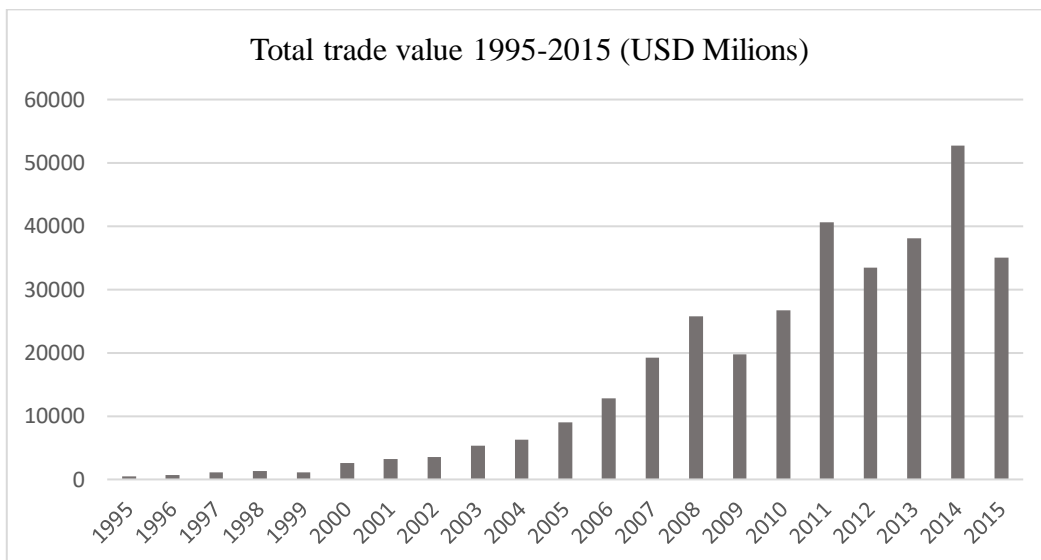


FIGURE 2.4 CHINA-IRAN BILATERAL TRADE, 1995-2015<sup>150</sup>

### Security interests, defence, and nuclear cooperation

Located between the economic and strategic spheres in the spectrum of China’s interests in Iran, the cluster that includes security interests and military and nuclear cooperation has direct implications on Beijing’s domestic concerns and critical effects on its broader relationships with the Persian Gulf and the United States. Granted that the Middle East does have secondary security significance for China

<sup>148</sup> On the potential and obstacles to Iran’s integration into the BRI. See, Jeremy Garlick and Radka Havlová, ‘The Dragon Dithers: Assessing the Cautious Implementation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Iran, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol.62, No.4 (2021); Greer and Batmanghelidj, ‘Last Among Equals’ p.X

<sup>149</sup> Ehteshami, et al, ‘Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions’, pp. 16-17

<sup>150</sup> Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity: <https://oec.world/>

when compared, for instance, to the ASEAN region and Central Asia,<sup>151</sup> there are at least two areas for which the region – and Iran itself – is critical for the PRC’s security: energy security on one side, and Beijing’s concerns regarding the emergence and possible domestic spillover of Islamic extremism on the other. As previously described, energy security has historically been a primary driver of China’s encounter with the Persian Gulf since the 1970s. Unsurprisingly, the growing Chinese reliance on oil imports has been translated into an increased dependence on the region. Therefore, it is safe to assume that maintaining a minimum degree of stability in the region is China’s interest. The same degree of stability and cooperation with pivotal regional states serve the Chinese objective of avoiding the spillover of Islamic extremism and terrorism in its Western provinces.

### *Energy security*

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested the idea that the energy factor – particularly oil supply – is somehow losing its historical place at the core of China’s relations with Iran. Beijing has been able to diversify enough oil sources to mitigate the impact of politically-sensitive Iranian oil on its energy security. Still, the IRI’s place in China’s energy security is critical for geopolitical reasons. As I wrote in the *Fulton’s Routledge Handbook of China-Middle East Relations*,

Roughly 40 percent of the oil imported by China comes from the Persian Gulf, making the Strait of Hormuz a crucial chokepoint that needs to remain open to avoid a major disruption in the Chinese energy supply. In the last few decades, Iran’s Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) has increased its presence in the Strait, publicly threatening that blocking passage through it is an option that the IRGC keeps on the table.<sup>152</sup>

Contrary to the famous 2003 “Malacca Predicament”, in which Hu Jintao claimed that some “major powers” were trying to control the Strait of Malacca, through which China was importing 80 per cent of its oil, therefore calling for a new oil

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<sup>151</sup> Tim Niblock, ‘The Middle East in China’s Global Strategy’, in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 32

<sup>152</sup> Jacopo Scita, ‘China–Iran Relations: A Low-Quality Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’, in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China–Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 175

strategy,<sup>153</sup> in the case of the Strait of Hormuz, cultivating a good relationship with Iran and shielding it from US economic pressure appears to be the primary strategy China adopted to protect itself from the risk of a disruptive closure of the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>154</sup>

A further argument that places Iran into a particular spot in China's energy security is the possibility of securing oil supply from like-minded, friendly countries in the Persian Gulf in case of a possible war with Washington over Taiwan.<sup>155</sup> While similar considerations can be made regarding the broader Chinese attempt to deepen and consolidate its relationships with the other oil-producer countries in the region – Saudi Arabia above all, which consistently ranks as China's leading supplier – it is self-evident that Iran has the comparative advantage of being a producer with significant capacity and a country that is unlikely to cooperate with a US attempt to embargo the oil shipped to Beijing. As remote and complex as such a scenario might sound, this enters into China's broader calculation about not alienating an oil-rich, friendly partner upon which Washington retains minimal leverage.

### *Countering Islamic extremism and terrorism*

If energy security is the most prominent driver of China's tilt towards the broader Middle East, the level of regional stability and cooperation with the region's pivotal countries required to secure energy routes is also functional to downplay one of China's rising domestic security concerns: the potential surge of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and separatism in the Muslim-majority provinces of the Western part of mainland China (i.e., the Xinjiang region). Although historically rooted, the Xinjiang issue has gained more centrality in the PRC's security discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when 'Uyghurs radicals have reportedly been trained in Pakistan, fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and joined the ranks of ISIL in Syria and Iraq.'<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Chen, 'China's Oil Strategy', p. 48

<sup>154</sup> On Iran's potential weaponization of the Strait of Hormuz, See, Abdolrasool Disvallar, 'Shifting Threats and Strategic Adjustment in Iran's Foreign Policy: The Case of Strait of Hormuz', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2021)

<sup>155</sup> John B. Alterman and John W. Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East - Significant Issues Series* (CSIS Press, 2008), pp. 47-48

<sup>156</sup> Andrew Scobell, 'China's Search for Security in the Greater Middle East', in James Reardon-Anderson, (ed.), *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 28

From a regional perspective, the emergence of Islamic extremism and terrorist groups from the ruins of failed states reinforces the idea that stability in the Middle East best serves China's interests and domestic security concerns. So does building influence with the regional states: China's expanding financial, commercial, and political ties in the Middle East worked as a tool in the hands of the PRC to leverage the regional governments against opposing and even criticising the repression of the Uyghurs.<sup>157</sup>

The IRI has its own peculiar location in China's attempt to manage the security concerns related to the Muslim minorities in its Western provinces. Although being less troubling than Wahabi groups from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda, the IRI's Islamic internationalism attracted the attention of Chinese authorities, which raised the issue of Iranian comparatively limited but still concerning activism in Xinjiang in several high-ranking meetings since the 1980s. Notably, over the years, several Iranian religious and political authorities, including presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, visited Xinjiang.<sup>158</sup> Therefore, the PRC's attempt to involve Iran in the Uyghur question fits with China's understanding of the IRI as a country with significant influence over (a part of) the Muslim world. Nonetheless, one of the refrains of Sino-Iranian relations since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2016 and 2021) is the cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism, which echoes China's unresolved security concerns over the possible spillover of Islamic terrorism within its borders. In that sense, Iran's stability – which the Chinese authorities have linked to the stability of the Persian Gulf region – has been one of the most significant drivers of China's attempt to mediate between Tehran and Washington in the last stage of the negotiations for the approval of the JCPoA (2013-2015). As reported by Garver, for instance,

In November 2014 Meng Jianzhu, CCP Politburo member and head of the CCP's Politics and Law Committee, visited Iran as special representative of Xi Jinping.

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<sup>157</sup> Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Sun Degang, Naser Al-Tamimi, 'China's Great Game in The Middle East', *ECFR Policy Briefs* (2019), p. 19

<sup>158</sup> Garver, China and Iran, pp. 131-138; James M. Dorsey, 'China's Uyghurs. A Potential Time Bomb', in James Reardon-Anderson, (ed.), *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 245-246

Meng met with Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani and Vice President Eshaq Jahangir to discuss increased cooperation in law enforcement and internal security with a focus on Xinjiang. An MFA spokesperson said of Meng's talks in Tehran that China was willing "to play a positive role in maintaining both countries' security interests and promote regional peace and stability." Meng apparently explained to IRI leaders China's concerns that war in the Gulf would undermine Xinjiang's internal security.<sup>159</sup>

Therefore, it appears plausible that 'for China, stronger ties with Iran were partially motivated by domestic concerns regarding the separatist challenges it faced in Xinjiang.'<sup>160</sup> As regional power with significant influence in (part of) the Muslim world, the IRI occupies a growing place in Beijing's expanding effort to create an institutionalised network of Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern countries (e.g., through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) to address its domestic security concerns.

### *Arms sales and defence cooperation*

Since their inception, the broader area of military cooperation and arms trade has been a critical component of PRC-IRI relations. During the 1990s, Beijing emerged as the IRI's second-largest weapons and military technology supplier after Russia, surpassing Moscow in 2008.<sup>161</sup> China's support for the Iranian military and defence industry has remained consistent over the years despite the constant US pressure to reduce and terminate it, providing an important source of legitimacy and political credit for the PRC in Iran.<sup>162</sup> A case in point, which will be expanded in Chapter 5, is the Chinese assistance to Iran during the Iraq-Iran War. During the conflict, the PRC was one of the few major international actors willing to supply ammunition and weapons to Iran, including anti-ship missiles such as the Silkworms, the C-801, and the C-802s. Notably, China also provided military equipment to Iraq,

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<sup>159</sup> John W. Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations: Beijing's Mediation Efforts', in James Reardon-Anderson, (ed.), *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 142-143

<sup>160</sup> Carrie L. Currier and Manochehr Dorraj, 'In Arms We Trust: The Economic and Strategic Factors Motivating China-Iran Relations', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol.15, No.1 (2010), p. 61

<sup>161</sup> Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), p. 56

<sup>162</sup> Garver, China and Iran, p. 166

anticipating the distinctive Chinese approach to balancing between regional rivals. In the post-war period, Sino-Iranian military cooperation expanded considerably. Beijing took advantage of Iran's international isolation and its need to rebuild and modernise its military to cut deals that involved arms transfers in exchange for Iranian oil. However, as noted by John Calabrese,

[N]othing that China sold to Iran has affected the conventional military balance in the region. Indeed, most of Iran's hardware is still Western vintage. More valuable than the weapons themselves have been China's contributions in the form of scientific expertise and dual-use technologies to Iran's indigenous arms manufacturing capability.<sup>163</sup>

The most important of such contributions has undoubtedly been the PRC's protracted assistance to Iran's ballistic missiles programs, which initially emerged in the form of triangulation between China, Iran, and North Korea, and then turned into direct cooperation between the PRC and the IRI.<sup>164</sup> Unsurprisingly, Sino-Iranian missile cooperation generated a notable entanglement with the United States. Washington attempted to leverage Beijing to abandon its cooperation with Tehran at various reprises. The 1997 Chinese decision to suspend nuclear and anti-ship ballistic missiles cooperation with Iran was the apogee successful US pressure. Yet, as in the case of the PRC's decision to stop selling Silkworm missiles to Tehran in 1988, which resulted in Beijing's sending to Iran the machinery to indigenously manufacture those missiles, China found other, less visible and more easily deniable ways to keep cooperating with Iran while accommodating US pressure.

Garver understands China's objectives in selling arms and helping Iran build and modernise its military industry as primarily commercially motivated. Yet, he recognises that the commercial explanation does not fully capture the added strategic value of this relationship, which includes the potential of Iran as a battleground tester of Chinese weapons.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, the rationale for the PRC's interest in sustaining military cooperation reflects, among other factors, the broader desire to build a more robust and stable partnership with Iran, having identified

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<sup>163</sup> John Calabrese, 'China and Iran: Mismatched Partners', *The Jamestown Foundation*, (2006), p.9

<sup>164</sup> For a detailed account of the PRC's assistance to the IRI's ballistic missiles programme until the early 2000s, see, Garver, *China and Iran*, pp. 185-189.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-199

military cooperation as an area of particular sensitivity and importance for the IRI. This was particularly apparent during the Iraq-Iran War when supplying weapons to Iran helped China gain trust among the Iranian leadership at a critical historical junction, which served Beijing to build the foundation of its relationship with the Islamic Republic. Equally, a military-strong Iran fits with China's strategic goal of countering US hegemony in the Persian Gulf – an objective discussed later in this Chapter. Therefore, two intertwined dynamics should be noted.

First, Sino-Iranian military relations have been remarkably consistent with the Chinese strategic approach to the Persian Gulf. Beijing perceives Iran as a pivotal country in the region and, on that base, aims to build a comprehensive relationship with it that serves its interests. Therefore, considering the centrality of self-defence and self-reliance in the IRI's doctrine, especially following the trauma of the Iraq-Iran War,<sup>166</sup> China seems to have been particularly successful in encountering Iran's demands, helping Tehran build and modernise its domestic military industry and strengthening its asymmetrical and conventional capabilities. In that sense, sustaining a military relationship whose tenets respond to the IRI's demands appears critical for China to gain and maintain influence in Iran. Notably, though, the PRC-IRI collaboration in the military and defence fields, despite being sustained, multi-level, and, at various stages, particularly problematic for the international community, has never turned into a military alliance, avoiding an entente that would have been perceived as clearly antagonistic by China's other partners in the Persian Gulf and the United States. Second but deeply related to the first dynamic, China's military and defence relationship with Iran has remained purposely ambiguous, often covered by plausible deniability, and subject to self-imposed limitations. Consequently, being a critical area of cooperation, China has used part of it as a bargaining chip to be exchanged with the United States for material and strategic concessions and reputational gains. In Garver's words,

When absolutely necessary, the secondary goal of moving the world toward multipolarity by supporting Iran's antihegemony resistance [of which China's

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<sup>166</sup> The most comprehensive, authoritative, and up-to-date study of Iran's defence and security doctrine and military capabilities is Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021)



military assistance is a fundamental component] would be subordinated to the primary goal of protecting the Sino-US relationship.<sup>167</sup>

Equally, having remained generally committed to the relationship despite the US pressure has arguably given China leverage and credibility in Tehran – a currency that can be spent to revive the spirit of the partnerships at particularly critical junctions. Therefore, military cooperation constitutes a consequential component of Sino-Iranian relations as it serves China's interest in nourishing its partnership with Iran and countering the US hegemony in the Persian Gulf.

### *Nuclear cooperation*

China's involvement in the Iranian nuclear programme is perhaps even more controversial and problematic than military cooperation. Yet, it reflects similar logic and motives. For the Islamic Republic, the nuclear programme is a potent symbol of independence and a source of prestige. Concurrently, the potential military dimension of the programme, which Iran has pursued covertly during the 1990s, has made it the pillar of the contention between the IRI and the international community in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For little more than a decade, China was Iran's major nuclear partner<sup>168</sup> – a key role in cementing the partnership between Beijing and Tehran. The PRC began assisting the IRI's effort to build an indigenous nuclear programme in 1985. In that year, during Rafsanjani's visit to Beijing, China and Iran secretly agreed to cooperate on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The relationship remained covert and denied by Chinese authorities until 1991. Ultimately, under pressure from the United States, Beijing accepted to terminate its nuclear cooperation with Iran in 1996-7, part of the broader Chinese disengagement from the IRI. Nonetheless, while practical assistance diminished after 2002, China reconfigured its support for the Iranian nuclear programme in a complex diplomatic venture that saw the PRC protecting Iran from the US and Western pressure while supporting and even mediating a diplomatic solution that assured the IRI's access to a peaceful atomic energy programme.<sup>169</sup> As the sequence of events that culminated with the 1996-7 disengagement, the twelve years of

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<sup>167</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 199

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139

<sup>169</sup> See Calabrese, 'China and Iran', pp. 10-11; Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', pp. 123-148

negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (The five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) resulted in the approval of the JCPoA in 2015 is one of the historical episodes presented in Chapter 5.

Given the sensitivity and controversy of Iran's nuclear programme is worth arguing what pushed China to play such a prominent role in it in the 1990s. As in the case of military cooperation, Garver suggests that commercial and profit considerations are undoubtedly crucial and perhaps the most straightforward and dry explanation of Beijing's nuclear cooperation with Iran.<sup>170</sup> Yet, it is also significant that, comparably to the importance of Chinese arms sales during the Iraq-Iran War, Iran's nuclear programme was so important and central in the mind of the IRI's leadership that establishing cooperation in that field would have put China in a favourable position vis-à-vis Iran. In that regard, the inception of the PRC's assistance to the Iranian nuclear programme coincided with one of the apexes of Iran's perceived international isolation, which pushed Iranian authorities to reconsider nuclear energy after the initial reluctance of the Revolutionary establishment. China was there to answer an Iranian demand: breaking the international isolation that emerged during the Iraq-Iran War and defending its right to pursue critical autonomous policies without capitulating to Western pressure. Nuclear cooperation was an integral part of Iran's struggle and China's response to it. A further, perhaps as banal as decisive consideration made by Chinese authorities was that even though the Iranian nuclear program would have taken a military dimension, it would have never been a direct threat to China. In other words, in striking contrast to the Western perception, China was never particularly worried about the potential menace of a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>171</sup> Notably, Sino-Iranian nuclear cooperation began during a transition phase in China's general attitude toward non-proliferation. In the 1980s and 1990s, Beijing was a key supplier of nuclear technology to Third World countries, often suspected of having covert military programmes, pushing the United States to try to socialise China within the non-proliferation regime. Washington was successful. In 1992 the PRC adhered to the NPT, showing the growing awareness among the Chinese authorities and the nonproliferation community that interrupting opaque nuclear cooperation with

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<sup>170</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, pp. 161-162

<sup>171</sup> 'The Iran Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing', International Crisis Group, *Asia Briefing* No.100, (2010)

Third World states would have been fundamental to being perceived as *responsible stakeholder*.<sup>172</sup> Iran was caught in between this transformation. China's nuclear assistance began under the typical opacity of Beijing's anti-hegemonic struggle of the 1980s, it was publicly acknowledged when China was in the process of signing the NPT, and it was then officially terminated in 1996-7 when the first signs of an Iranian covert military programme began openly circulating and turned into one of the US pressure tools to push China to disengage from Tehran. To a significant extent, the 1996-7 disengagement prevented China from substantial reputational damage. Arguably, despite the bitter reaction of the Iranian authorities, avoiding the damage of being seen as a supporter of a rouge state is what allowed Beijing to revert its practical assistance in diplomatic support during the Iran nuclear negotiations a decade later.

### **China's strategic interests in Iran**

The last set of interests here presented refers to China's strategic interests in building a relationship with Iran are mainly related to the IRI's status as regional power. This sphere takes into account both the IRI's pinnacle position in China's Persian Gulf strategy and its function as a 'bulwark against Western [namely the US] influence' in the Middle East.<sup>173</sup> The two are intertwined and built one upon the other.

As abundantly described in this Chapter, the PRC views Iran as a pivot state in the Persian Gulf sub-region and, more broadly, in the Middle East. Theoretically, China's approach to the Persian Gulf can be described as typical and successful *strategic hedging* built upon

Deepening engagement with different countries in the region, alienating no one, and not antagonising the strongest country. It usually starts with stronger economic ties and builds towards deeper political relations, slowly strengthening influence and power in the region.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 142

<sup>173</sup> Esfandiari and Tabatabai, *Triple Axis*, pp. 33-34

<sup>174</sup> Jonathan Fulton, 'China is Trying to Create a Wedge Between the US and Gulf Allies: Washington Should Take Note', *Atlantic Council*, 27 January 2022  
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/china-is-trying-to-create-a-wedge-between-the-us-and-gulf-allies-washington-should-take-note/>

In that sense, the partnership diplomacy that has emerged under Xi Jinping appears to be the natural continuation – or the formalisation – of the PRC’s enduring *strategic hedging* strategy. In fact, partnerships are the most suitable tool to lay the ground for building deeper political and economic relations, creating both a hierarchy of relationships and a horizontal, diffuse Chinese presence in the region without the burden and the confrontational posture of alliances. Iran’s place in China’s *strategic hedging* in the region is natural and consequential to Tehran’s regional power status. This is also consistent with another theme of the Sino-Iranian encounter: Iran’s role as a strong “littoral state” in a Persian Gulf states-led regional security. This position, very much welcomed by the Iranian leadership before and after the 1979 Revolution, was first launched by Chinese Foreign Minister Jin Pengfei in his 1973 visit to Tehran – the first of a high-ranking Chinese official. As quoted by Garver, Ji articulated China’s position as follows,

We have consistently held that the affairs of a given [...] region must be managed by the countries and peoples of that region [...]. Iran and some other Persian Gulf countries hold that the affairs of this region should be jointly managed by the Persian Gulf countries and brook no outside interference. This is a just position and we express our firm support for it.<sup>175</sup>

China’s stance has remained significantly consistent over time and still holds today,<sup>176</sup> having evolved from being addressed mainly toward the USSR’s infiltrations in the Persian Gulf during the 1970s to regain traction from the 1980s in opposition to the US military presence in the region. Arguably, this position empowers the IRI more than other neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which, albeit being equally pivotal in China’s Persian Gulf strategy, benefit from the security umbrella of the United States. Yet, less paradoxical than it might sound, the PRC – as an almost perfect *strategic hedger* – has significantly enjoyed the benefits of a US presence in the Persian Gulf, suggesting that the proposition of a security landscape managed by regional states is more a conceptual

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<sup>175</sup> As quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 51

<sup>176</sup> For instance, in January 2022, China Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the Middle East does not need a “foreign patriarch” to interfere in the region, echoing the idea that external power should not interfere with regional security. See, ‘Middle East has no ‘power vacuum,’ needs no ‘foreign patriarch’: Wang Yi’, *Global Times*, 16 January 2022 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246036.shtml>

exercise or a long-term aspiration for an ideal arrangement – whose implementation horizon is blurred if not purposely undefined – than a concrete Chinese policy for the Persian Gulf.

Therefore, it is helpful to broaden the perspective to understand Iran's value in that context better and appreciate the tension between China's strategic interest in building a more profound relationship with Iran and the PRC's relationship with the United States. As Alterman and Garver wrote, 'one of the greatest areas of strategic difference [between the PRC and the US] is with policy toward Iran.'<sup>177</sup> Thus, from a Chinese perspective, Iran represents both a conundrum and an opportunity in the relationship with Washington. In fact, despite the need to constantly manage the contradictions between the two relationships, the presence in the Persian Gulf of a country that is not aligned with the United States – as the GCC countries are – provides China with the opportunity to forge a relationship that avoids Washington's complete hegemonic influence in an area that is of strategic importance for Beijing, particularly concerning its energy security. The point of view presented in an article published in the Chinese *Strategy and Management Journal*, in which the author recommends China aligns more strongly with Iran, is particularly elucidating. As summarised by Christina Lin,

In the article, the author posits that since the United States already controls the west bank of the oil-rich Persian Gulf via its pro-American proxies (e.g., Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states), the Gulf is in effect an "internal sea" for the United States, and challenges to that position are likely to fail. However, if China and Russia expand relations with Iran, they could maintain a "minimum balance" to thwart U.S. moves. Since securing oil imports from the Gulf requires both the U.S.-controlled west bank and the China/Russia-supported Iranian east bank, this axis would block U.S. efforts to impose oil embargoes against other countries. Should the United States and China ever have a military clash over Taiwan, the United States would not shut off China's Gulf oil supplies since China, Russia, and Iran control the Gulf's east bank.<sup>178</sup>

Arguably, Chinese decision-makers have followed the abovementioned suggestion thoroughly, recognising Iran's strategic value as a balancer in the Persian Gulf. If

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<sup>177</sup> Alterman and Garver, *The Vital Triangle*, p. 97

<sup>178</sup> Christina Y. Lin, 'China, Iran, And North Korea: A Triangular Strategic Alliance', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.14, No.1 (2010), p. 50

*strategic hedging* effectively describes China's strategy in the Persian Gulf, *soft balancing* could perhaps better catch the IRI's value in Beijing's competition with Washington.<sup>179</sup> *Soft balancing* is meant to 'counter the preponderance of the system leader while avoiding the confrontation associated with an extensive arms buildup or the development of a defensive military alliance aimed at the system leader.'<sup>180</sup> Both in the regional context and on a more global level, the relationship with Iran, which has expanded over time but has also seen the PRC categorically refusing to turn it into a military entente, fits the idea that China works to build its own space of influence in competition with the United States while avoiding a military confrontation with it. Yet, as will be explained later, China's strategic interests in building a more profound and stable relationship with Iran are limited – or at least tempered – by the influence of external intervening variables, namely China's relations with Saudi Arabia and the United States.

### **Asymmetry in Chinese-Iranian mutual interests**

I presented China's main interests in building and expanding relations with Iran in the earlier sections. As explained, those interests occupy a spectrum that goes from those essentially related to China's domestic development to those with broader strategic significance. Notably, most of the interests presented fit with the IRI's demand for international cooperation. For instance, the export of fossil fuels is a crucial source of Iran's state budget. More generally, the political, economic, and material support of a major global power is critical to the IRI's quest to break international isolation without capitulating to the US demands. Yet, despite the significant complementarity between Chinese interests toward Iran and Tehran's demands to Beijing, an element of critical asymmetry persists.

In his reflections on national interests in the 1950s and 1960s, Hans Morgenthau defines a fundamental distinction between the *vital interests*, those that pertain to the security and status of a given state and for whose protection the state is theoretically willing to fight a war, and the *secondary interests*, which are 'unlikely to affect a state's security, its power, its economy, or its political status'.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> On the debate about differences between soft balancing and strategic hedging, see, Brock F. Tesson, 'System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu', *Security Studies*, Vol.21, No.2 (2012)

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207

<sup>181</sup> Malici and Walker, *Role Theory*, p. 11

Building on Morgenthau's distinction, a three-level typology of interests better catches the asymmetric intersection between Tehran's place in China's national interests and Iran's demands. Here I identify *vital interests* in the same way as Morgenthau does, namely those for which a state would fight for them. Instead, secondary interests reflect critical strategic, security, or economic concerns and domestic pressure. Yet, a state would not fight for *secondary interests* because they can either be pursued peacefully or satisfied through other inter-state relations or deferred until the conditions for cooperation improve. Lastly, *tertiary interests* are incidental to what a state can offer in a particular area at a specific time or under certain political conditions. They are pursued as long as they are easily achievable and are (almost) only relevant at the bilateral level. The impossibility of pursuing *tertiary interests* does not significantly affect the state's security, economic welfare, or global strategy.

First of all, none of China's interests in building a partnership with Iran is *vital*. In fact, arguably, China has no *vital interests* in the Persian Gulf except perhaps energy security. Still, while the question of if, when, and under what circumstance the PRC would enter a military fight to protect its energy security could be debated, there is no evidence that China would fight to defend its interests in and relationship with Iran. Tehran's place in Beijing's energy security, cooperation against terrorism, and the IRI's broader status as regional power are all *secondary interests*. Only the first one – Iran's geopolitical influence on the Persian Gulf oil routes – leans towards China's first-tier interests. Vice versa, along the trajectory of China-Iran relations, Iran's relevance as China's critical oil supplier seems on a declining path, degrading what unquestionably was a *secondary interest* in the 1980s and 1990s toward the third tier since the mid-2000s. The other Chinese interests in Iran, namely non-energy-related economic relations and military cooperation, are undoubtedly necessary if not crucial in nourishing China-Iran relations. Still, they are not a determinant of the PRC's economy, security, and global strategy. Nuclear cooperation, instead, is less clearly classifiable as a purely *tertiary interest*. Although China has shown the will to interrupt the technical assistance to Iran's nuclear programme from 1996-7, the diplomatic support demonstrated during the nuclear negotiations (2003-2015) suggests that the issue is of non-negligible strategic interests. Finally, I classify China's strategic interest in Iran as a balancer of the United States as a *tertiary interest* strongly leaning toward

the upper tier because the IRI's relevance significantly plays out at the regional level. Still, it is far less significant in the broader context of the global China-US competition. Table 2.1 summarises China's interests in the IRI within the three-tier classification presented above. The arrows indicate those interests positioned between two tiers, signalling if they are leaning toward the upper or lower rank. Overall, the aggregate picture confirms that for Beijing, Sino-Iranian relations are a second-tier partnership.

Table 2.1: China's interests in the Islamic Republic of Iran

<i>Vital interests</i>	<i>Secondary interests</i>	<i>Tertiary interests</i>
		→ Energy relations →
		Economic relations
	← Energy security ←	
	Counter-terrorism	
		Defence cooperation & arm sales
		← Nuclear cooperation ←
	Regional power	
		← ← Balancer of the United States ← ←

China's interests appear significantly complementary to Iran's critical demands. Such complementarity is indisputably an essential driver, without which it would have been hard to see Sino-Iranian relations surviving and even expanding over the decades. Nonetheless, mirroring the abovementioned interests in a hierarchy that reflects the IRI's perspective suggests the existence of a visible disparity. In fact, despite Iranian presidents and political factions having shown mixed attitudes toward the relations with China,<sup>182</sup> the pressure posed by Iran's troubling behaviour, the enmity with the United States, and international sanctions have turned the PRC to be, perhaps except for Russia, the only great power with which the IRI has been able to build substantially stable relations. Consequently, the IRI's *vital interests*, which include but are not limited to protecting its right to pursue independent policies, building regular and asymmetrical military

<sup>182</sup> See Ehteshami et al., 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions'



capabilities, the ability to extract and trade its fossil fuels, and ultimately assuring the survival of the Islamic Republic itself, have been critically bound to the preservation and expansion of the partnership with the PRC. The result is that the interests that tie Beijing and Tehran together are at best *secondary* or *tertiary* for the former. Vice versa, they respond to Iran's vital concerns and demands.

### **Intervening variables: Sino-Iraqi and Sino-Saudi relations**

Sino-Iraqi relations have been the primary external intervening variable in the role-taking phase of China-Iran relations. As described in Chapter 5, the Iraq-Iran war (1980-8) has been a constitutive and defining event for the newly-established Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, while creating a long-lasting trauma in Tehran, the war with Iraq defined two fundamental aspects of China's role in the relations with Iran. On one side, the PRC emerged as one of the few major international actors willing to help an increasingly isolated IRI, sending weapons and providing minimum political and diplomatic support. On the other, Beijing's ties with Baghdad were historically deeper than Sino-Iranian relations – a reality that sustained the PRC's attempt to balance politically, diplomatically, and through arms sales to both belligerents between Iraq and Iran. Therefore, Sino-Iraqi relations intervened in a crucial phase of China's role-taking by making apparent to the IRI that, for Beijing, (1) the partnership with Tehran would be embedded in – and subordinated to – its emerging regional strategy based on balancing between all the relevant actors, and (2) that the political and diplomatic support that the PRC could offer to the IRI would be broadly bound to a narrative that attempts to move the blame game from the regional actors to the external, hegemonic powers.<sup>183</sup>

Although China has enjoyed long-lasting, continuously expanding relations with all the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, the one with Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly the one that immediately catches the eyes when trying to locate Sino-Iranian relations in the context of China's Persian Gulf politics. The reason is that Tehran and Riyadh are caught in an enduring competition that is not just

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<sup>183</sup> For instance, as described in Chapter 5, China did not identify Iraq as the aggressor state. Instead, it preferred pointing toward the weapons sales of the USSR, US, and France as the cause of the persistence of the conflict.

geopolitical but also driven by competing ethnonational and religious identities.<sup>184</sup> Sino-Saudi relations blossomed in the 1990s when China's growing energy demands drove the two countries to become significantly interdependent.<sup>185</sup> As Fulton writes, 'much of Saudi Arabia's influence in international politics can be summarised by three factors: geography, oil, and Islam.'<sup>186</sup> Those three elements are undoubtedly at the core of Saudi Arabia's attractiveness to China. Yet, most notably, they show a striking similarity with what stands at the foundation of Sino-Iranian relations. Nonetheless, non-dissimilarly from the IRI, Saudi Arabia is a pivotal country in China's Persian Gulf strategy, and the Sino-Saudi relationship is a great power-middle power partnership. Therefore, Sino-Iranian and Sino-Saudi relations appear to be broadly comparable, at least in their foundations and structural distribution of power. Nonetheless, in the Beijing-Riyadh partnership – contrary to the path of Sino-Iranian relations – the natural asymmetry of great power-middle power partnerships appears tempered rather than enhanced by, above all, a more balanced, less troubled energy relationship. Wrapping up, although Sino-Saudi relations do not represent an immediate source of external asymmetry for China-Iran relations, their development poses an element of inherent competition for Tehran.

### **Intervening variable: The China-US great power relations**

As vastly detailed in this thesis, the United States represents the most critical intervening variable in Sino-Iranian relations. The reason is simple. Both the PRC and the IRI are intimately connected with the US, whether as a point of reference and competitor for the former or as the primary source of negative identification and enmity for the latter. As a result, it is almost impossible to think about the partnership between China and Iran without considering how it interplays with the United States. Yet, from the structural perspective adopted in this Chapter, the Tehran-Beijing-Washington triangular relationship is a further source of

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<sup>184</sup> Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), p. 4

<sup>185</sup> For a detailed history of Sino-Saudi Relations see: Jonathan Fulton, *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 72-113; and Nasser Al-Tamimi, 'China and Saudi Arabia: From Enmity to Strategic Hedging', in Jonathan Fulton (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021)

<sup>186</sup> Fulton, *China's Relations*, p. 73

asymmetry. In fact, what matters the most here is how differently rank the relationships that China has with Iran and the United States. As postulated in this Chapter, the Sino-Iranian partnership is an archetypical great power-middle power relationship. Vice versa, the relationship between Beijing and Washington pertains to the sphere of relationships between actors whose power asymmetry is comparatively significantly less pronounced than in the case of great power-middle power relations. Although it can be argued that in several realms (e.g., military power, soft power, and education), China has not yet peered at the United States, the trajectory of Beijing's rise as great power, especially after 1978 and even more pronouncedly with the collapse of the USSR, has been heavily characterised by both cooperative and competitive relations with the United States. Although historically tormented and often downplayed in favour of the perennial status as developing country, since the Xi Jinping era, Chinese authorities and thinkers appear to have finally embraced the idea that the relationship with the United States is that between two great powers.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, Beijing's relationship with Washington naturally ranks above that with the Islamic Republic, with the former being a first-tier relationship and the latter a second-tier one. As a result, when the two relationships conflict, their different ranks define which one will prevail over the other. Notably, Role Theory helps defining this tension as inter-role conflicts, elucidating a typical pattern of Sino-Iranian relations: when China deprioritises its relationship with Iran to favour that with the United States, Iran's expectations face a blow which Beijing has to compensate to maintain a minimum consistency in the performance of its role as to prevent its collapse.

### **China-Iran relations: An asymmetrical, interest-driven partnership**

In conclusion, Sino-Iranian relations are characterised by a triple asymmetry. The dominant one is inherently defined by the great power-middle power framework, which describes the (highly) asymmetrical distribution of resources, military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities between the PRC and the IRI. The other two

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<sup>187</sup>See, Robert S. Hinck, Jacquelyn N. Manly, Randolph A. Kluver, and William J. Norris, 'Interpreting and Shaping Geopolitics in Chinese Media: The Discourse of the 'New Style of Great Power Relations'', *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol.26, No.5 (2016); Zeng Jinghan and Shaun Breslin, 'China's 'New Type of Great Power Relations': a G2 with Chinese Characteristics?', *International Affairs*, Vol.92, No.4 (2016)

sources of asymmetry are respectively contained by and competing with the great power-middle power framework. Material and strategic interests are the drivers of China's relations with Iran. Yet, although the impressive degree of potential complementarity between what the PRC could offer and what the IRI demands, mutual interests rank significantly different in each other's hierarchies. In fact, what is *vital* for Tehran is at least of *secondary* importance for Beijing. Therefore, this chasm generates an additional element of asymmetry that is placed within the great power-middle power framework. Outside it, for China, the relations with the United States are higher in rank than the partnership with Iran. Instead, the partnership with China is not easily replaceable for the IRI, given the historical hurdles in building stable relations with other major economic, political, and military actors. Therefore, the inevitable triangular entanglement between Iran, China, and the United States further enhances the asymmetry of the Sino-Iranian great power-middle power partnership. Ergo, the structural dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations has asymmetry as its main feature and Chinese interests, within the relationship with Iran and around it, as both the main relational driver and the crucial limit.

### **The ideational dimension of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations**

The present chapter reconstructs the ideational dimension of China's role-taking and role-enactment processes vis-à-vis Iran. As presented in Chapter 1, it constitutes the second component of the two-dimensional model of interaction developed in this work. Compared to the structural dimension defined in Chapter 2, the ideational framework is significantly less rigid and, consequently, when intra-role and inter-role conflicts emerge, it often functions as a tool to conveniently compensate for the limited adaptability of the structural dimension of Sino-Iranian relations. Yet, the relative flexibility of the ideational size should not be exaggerated. Firstly, the adaptability of the narratives remains bound to the perimeter set by the role's expectations. In other words, it must be credible when China or Iran promotes a specific narrative of their relations. Secondly, its function as a rescue tool to temper the emergence of intra-role and inter-role conflicts is not absolute. The role is sustainable in the medium and long-term when its two components overlap: Any stretch to the ideational dimension has to be temporary. The more significant the deviation is, the less sustainable it becomes over time.

In his seminal work on China's global identity, Hoo Tiang Boon defines global identity as 'the structure of ideas of political elites that relate to their country's role in the international system'. Hoo's definition is, by his admission, derived from Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim's conceptualisation presented in their work "In Search for a Theory of National Identity," in which they present national identity as a hierarchical ideational structure that has at its top the ideas, principles, worldviews, and the derived policies of the governing elites. Indeed, this does not equal the complete irrelevance of the larger societal body in the definition of the global identity. Yet, what matters the most in the ideation, definition, and conduct of foreign policy is the highest level of this hierarchical structure – the state

level.<sup>188</sup> In looking at the ideational component that forms China's role vis-à-vis Iran, this study embraces the same theoretical approach.

It is essential to clarify that this chapter does not aim to present the ideational components of China's external projection in their totality, nor those of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, the ideational dimension here described reflects what is on the *shelf* of Chinese and Iranian foreign policymakers and thinkers when they interact. The role has its own language built upon words, concepts, and mutually understandable ideas, reflecting China and Iran's ideational cues and expectations. Some concepts and principles that are certainly part of China's (and Iran's) foreign policy cultures are not necessarily relevant in the interaction between the two. In fact, some of them may even be counterproductive. For instance, consider the ideological imprinting of socialism and communism on the PRC's foreign policy. These are ideas and references that China could deploy with countries that share a similar political orientation, hardly with the IRI. Noteworthy, when the 1979 Revolution installed the Islamic Republic, China was already equipped with some tools that constituted the core of its role-taking and role-enactment vis-à-vis the IRI. I argue that this has facilitated Beijing to overcome the initial distrust of Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary leadership in Iran. Also, such pre-existing ideational components tempered the natural distance between the clerical, theocratic regime of the IRI and the communist, atheist PRC.

Further clarification is needed. Some of the principles and components described in this chapter are not always translated into coherent foreign policies. A good example is China's historical emphasis on the principle of non-interference and the absolute respect for sovereignty. While those principles remain critical components in the PRC's foreign policy narratives – as they are in the ideational dimension of China's role vis-à-vis Iran – the actual Chinese foreign policy has often departed from them.<sup>189</sup> This is the reflection of the natural and ever-present tension between principles and interests in the conduct of foreign policy.

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<sup>188</sup> See Hoo Tiang Boon, *China's Global Identity. Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), p. xvii; Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim, 'In Search of a Theory of National Identity', in Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim (eds.), *China's Quest for National Identity*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993)

<sup>189</sup> See, Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, 'The Limits to China's Non-Interference Foreign Policy: Pro-State Interventionism and the Rescaling of Economic Governance', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.69, No.2 (2015); Daniel Large, 'China and the Contradictions of 'Non-Interference' in Sudan', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.35, No.115 (2008)

## **Chapter outline**

The chapter presents a series of concepts that constitutes the core components of the ideational dimension of China's role-taking and role-enactment vis-à-vis Iran. The concepts presented are part of the PRC's foreign policy culture and are central to the Chinese official foreign policy discourse. Given that, despite sitting at the very core of China's external projection, these ideational components are not static. Still, their saliency, interpretation, and application vary over time, and their description tries to appreciate their historical evolution. Once detected what sits on the Chinese *shelf*, the chapter will briefly look at what are the corresponding concepts on the Iranian side. In other words, the aim is to understand why the PRC promotes certain specific ideas in the role-taking and role-enactments processes vis-à-vis Iran. Then the chapter will present the two core dimensions of the ideational characterisation of China's relationship with Iran: the idea of an anti-hegemonic partnership and civilisational solidarity. Garver's description of the Sino-Iranian civilisational solidarity is an exceptionally valuable conceptualisation of the spirit behind the relationship. Yet, while in Garver's analysis, the ideational dimension is secondary regarding concrete national interests in shaping Sino-Iranian relations, it assumes a renewed centrality in the definition of China's role vis-à-vis Iran. Finally, the chapter presents two intervening dyads – the China-Third World/developing world dyad and the China-US one – which reflect the developing world and the US's place as the main *significant others* within the ideational component of China's role vis-à-vis Iran.

## **China's national humiliation and the victim mentality**

The concept of national humiliation is key in the ideational interaction between China and the IRI. In fact, as will emerge later in this chapter through Garver's conceptualisation of civilisational solidarity, it constitutes one of, if not the most significant source of empathy and solidarity in China's discourse vis-à-vis Iran.

China's self-perception as a victim of the unfair and humiliating behaviour of the imperialist powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century – the so-called Century of Humiliation – is frequently referenced by Chinese authorities.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> See Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p.XXI; and the works he quotes: William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peter Hays Gries, *China's*

Stuart Harris attributes the political saliency of the national humiliation to China's self-perceived exceptionalism, which, from his discussion with Chinese scholars and officials, is derived from the idea that China's history and culture are not only different but also superior to that of the West. In that sense, the humiliation suffered from what perhaps is an inferior culture is even more salient.<sup>191</sup> Yet, it is reasonably clear – and maybe not surprising – that the use of the national humiliation as a cogent component of Chinese nationalism is the result of a “selective representation and reconstruction of historical memories as a mobilisation tool.”<sup>192</sup>

While the trauma of the unequal treaties that China signed with the Western powers, the Russian empire, and Japan between 1840 and 1945 have primarily formed China as a nation-state, Sebastian Harnisch has described the significance of the victim mentality in defining China's self as dynamic, changing its salience through the different leaderships and historical occurrences: During the Mao era, the victim mentality was “subdued” to regain a dramatic centrality after 1978 when the leaderships of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao focused on outlining and implementing a new patriotic education – a necessity that turned into an imperative after 1988.<sup>193</sup> Some scholars have argued that the self-perception as a victim has lost centrality in Chinese elites' foreign policy thinking over time.<sup>194</sup> Yet, it still is one of the factors that is recalled in response to specific traumas such as the imposition of collective sanctions on the PRC by the G7 after the Tiananmen massacre in 1988 or the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.<sup>195</sup> Talking about the former to a Japanese business delegation visiting China in December 1989, Deng displayed the victim mentality in full swing:

“Some Western countries, on the pretext that China has an unsatisfactory human rights record and an irrational and illegitimate socialist system, attempt to jeopardise our national sovereignty. Countries that play power politics are not qualified to talk about

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*New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, US: University of California Press, 2005)

<sup>191</sup> Stuart Harris, *China's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), p. 5

<sup>192</sup> Wang Lihe, ‘The Century of Humiliation and the Politics of Memory in China’, *Leviathan*, Vol.10, No.2 (2020), p. 40

<sup>193</sup> Sebastian Harnisch, ‘China's Historical Self and International Roles’, in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

<sup>194</sup> See Harris, *China's Foreign Policy*, p. 9; Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 43

<sup>195</sup> Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p.XXI



human rights. How many people's human rights have they violated throughout the world! Since the Opium War, when they began to invade China, how many Chinese people's human rights have they violated! The Group of Seven summit meeting held in Paris adopted a resolution imposing sanctions on China, which meant they thought they had supreme authority and could impose sanctions on any country and people not obedient to their wishes. They are not the United Nations. And even the resolutions of the United Nations have to be approved by a majority before they come into force. What grounds have they for interfering in the internal affairs of China? Who gave them power to do that? The Chinese people will never accept any action that violates the norms of international relations, and they will never yield to outside pressure.”<sup>196</sup>

It is noteworthy that Shogo Suzuki identifies the resurgence of the victim mentality in the aftermath of the Western response to the Tiananmen massacre as China's strategy to reaffirm its legitimate position in the international community. Suzuki's work offers an important indication that the victimhood identity is a fundamental ideational tool that the PRC picks from its *shelf* in response to external pressure:

The labelling of China as an autocratic and potentially destabilising 'Other' may serve to reinforce the identities of the Western members of the International Society as 'democratic' and adhering to rightful conduct in an International Society increasingly coloured by humanitarian norms, a similar process can also be observed from the Chinese side.<sup>197</sup>

As a result, 'China thus identifies itself as a 'victim' in a world where it is surrounded by "victimising others."<sup>198</sup> Iran, otherwise, due to its historical experience and status within the international community, is not part of the "victimising others." Instead, it is a country upon which China could project its victimised self and find compassion and empathy.

### **The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and China's bid on sovereignty and non-interference**

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<sup>196</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "First Priority Should Always Be Given to National Sovereignty and Security" - Excerpt from a talk with Sakurachi Yoshio and other leading members of a delegation from the Japanese Association for the Promotion of International Trade, 1 December 1989

<sup>197</sup> Shogo Suzuki, 'The Importance of 'Othering' in China's National Identity: Sino-Japanese Relations as a Stage of Identity Conflicts', *The Pacific Review*, Vol.20, No.1 (2017), pp. 33-34

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

Since their launch in 1954, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*heping gongchu wuxiang yuanze*) have been a cornerstone of the PRC's foreign policy. They are still present in the current Chinese discourse as a direct and indirect reference.<sup>199</sup> According to Lanteigne, "the Five Principles were also praised by China for their flexibility and resiliency since they were adaptable to both the Cold War and post-Cold War strategic interactions."<sup>200</sup> In the words of Xu Hong, a Director-General at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their establishment:

China stressed that the Five Principles have always been the cornerstone of China's independent foreign policy of peace and will continue to play an ever-greater role in promoting the development of a harmonious world and a community of common destiny for all mankind.<sup>201</sup>

On the same occasion, Xi Jinping was not shy at reinforcing the centrality and value of the Five Principles, claiming that they "give concrete expression to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and facilitate their implementation." Then, according to Xi:

It is no coincidence that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were born in Asia, because they embody the Asian tradition of loving peace. The Chinese nation has always held such beliefs as "peace is most precious", "harmony without uniformity", "peace among all nations" and "universal love and non-aggression."<sup>202</sup>

Xi's explicit reference to the Asian origin – which is supposed to carry some sort of Asian peace-loving spirit – of the Five Principles is functional to reiterate the

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<sup>199</sup> See John W. Garver, 'China, German Reunification, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol.8, No.1 (1994); Sandra Gillespie, 'Diplomacy on a South-South Dimension: The Legacy of Mao's Three-Worlds Theory and the Evolution of Sino-African Relation', in Hannah Slavik, *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy* (Diplo Foundation, 2004); and Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 11

<sup>200</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 87

<sup>201</sup> Xu Hong, 'The Chair's Summary of the Colloquium on "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the Development of International Law" Held in Beijing on May 27, 2014', *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol.13, No.3 (2014), p.502

<sup>202</sup> Xi Jinping, *Carry Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to Build a Better World Through Win-Win Cooperation*, Address at the Meeting Marking the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Initiation of the Five Principle of Peaceful Coexistence, 28 June 2014.

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/201407/t20140701\\_678184.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/201407/t20140701_678184.html)

theme of *otherness* and exceptionalism that, for instance, is a constant reference in Sino-Iranian exchanges.

Historically, the Five Principles were first introduced by Chinese and Indian leaders in April 1954 and quickly extended beyond the relationship between the two Asian giants: As early as August 1954, Zhou Enlai declared the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence the basis for the “relations between China and the various nations of Asia and the world”<sup>203</sup>. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Principles were officially extended to Beijing’s relations with non-socialist Third World countries. This step preceded their universalisation in the 1970s.<sup>204</sup> Yet, as described by Garver, the Five Principles should not understand as ‘a single overriding principle guiding all action but a range of options, of available principles. Moreover, Chinese leaders pick and choose among these principles on the basis of practical pressures and needs.’ This is even clearer when the fundamental core of the Five Principles – the respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference – collides with other guiding ideas of China’s foreign policy, the support for the right of self-determination. According to Garver, Beijing has often responded to this conflict by ‘distinguish[ing] between audiences and apply differing sets of principles to different audiences.’<sup>205</sup> The Five Principles are the following:

1. Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty
2. Mutual non-aggression
3. Mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs
4. Equality and mutual benefit
5. Peaceful coexistence

Interestingly, the Chinese scholar Zhang Baijia adds to the Five Principles two other concepts that China proposed almost contextually, “equal treatment” and “equality for all countries, big or small”. According to him, these two principles further subvert the traditional view of the international order and the concept of power

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<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Bruce Larkin, ‘China and the Third World’, *Current History*, Vol.69, No.408 (1975)

<sup>204</sup> John W. Garver, *Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China* (Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 122

<sup>205</sup> Garver, ‘China, German Reunification’, p.136

politics, giving credit to developing countries' aspirations in Asia and Africa. Ultimately, these principles 'played an important role in shaping the diplomatic image of the PRC.'<sup>206</sup> Mark Lanteigne notes that the Five Principles are firmly embedded in the Westphalian state concept and reflect China's traditional conservative understanding of sovereignty.<sup>207</sup> According to Sandra Gillespie, the Five Principles could be reduced to two macro-principles: non-interference and justice.<sup>208</sup> Both certainly have a strong echo in Iran's revolutionary and post-revolutionary discourse. The respect for sovereignty and non-interference is so deeply rooted in the Chinese foreign policy discourse that it is officially considered one of the critical principles of the PRC's foreign policy and thus considered a formal policy<sup>209</sup>, to the point of having been included in the Chinese constitution in 1982.<sup>210</sup> Speaking of the concept of sovereignty as the foundation of the Five Principles, the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs affirmed that:

The principle of sovereignty is about mutual respect for sovereignty, security and core interests, respect for the inherent right of a country to maintain its unity and territorial integrity, mutual respect for social system, ideology and path of development, and seeking common ground while reconciling differences. The domestic affairs of a country should be determined by its people, whereas international affairs should be handled through consultation by people of all countries in a democratic manner. Individual and collective human rights must be respected, protected and promoted, and the right to development be defended in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and other international treaties. No country shall interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries. The world is indeed undergoing enormous changes and there is a growing convergence of international common interests. But this should not be used as an excuse for wilfully interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries, or for acts aimed to incite civil strife, instigate separation, or overthrow a government.

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<sup>206</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy in the Course of China's Growth since 1949—The Shift from a Revolutionary and National Perspective to a Developmental and Global Outlook', *Social Sciences in China*, Vol.39, No.2 (2018)

<sup>207</sup> Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 46

<sup>208</sup> Gillespie, 'Diplomacy on a South-South Dimension', p. 112

<sup>209</sup> See Large, 'China and the Contradictions', p.93; "The Principle of the Foreign Policy of the People's Republic of China is the Protection of the Independence, Freedom, Territorial Integrity and National Sovereignty, the Upholding of Lasting International Peace and Friendly Co-Operation Between the Peoples of all Countries, and Opposition to the Imperialist Policy of Aggression and War", Reported in the CPC Central Archives, ed., *Selected Documents of the CPC Central Committee*, Vol.18, p. 595

<sup>210</sup> Chen Zheng, 'China Debates the Non-Interference Principle', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.9, No.3 (2016), p. 351

Otherwise, the world will be in chaos, and the common interest of the international community is merely empty talk.<sup>211</sup>

The emphasis on the respect of sovereignty and non-interference is indeed functional to the PRC to promote its foreign policy as fundamentally different from that of the superpowers and former colonial powers, which are presented as imperialist and interventionist.<sup>212</sup> At the same time, they also reflect a mutual request that China submits to the other nations: The PRC pledge is that ‘China will neither “import” models from other countries nor “export” the Chinese model or ask other countries to copy the Chinese practice.’<sup>213</sup> The protection of its territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as the non-interference in its domestic affairs, undoubtedly remains among the top priorities of the PRC.<sup>214</sup> As summarised by Chen, ‘non-interference [...] is understood as a key guideline and major rhetorical tool of Beijing’s diplomatic work.’<sup>215</sup>

### **The anti-hegemonic dimension of the PRC’s foreign policy narrative**

Another recurring concept in China’s role-taking and role-enactment vis-à-vis Iran is the anti-hegemonic theme that has pervaded the Sino-Iranian relationship since its inception. The use of this rhetorical reference by the Chinese pre-dated the 1979 Iranian revolution and continued throughout the history of PRC-IRI relations, reaching its apogee in the mid-1990s.<sup>216</sup> Most notably, the centrality of the anti-hegemonic partnership narrative in Sino-Iranian relations adheres to the relevance of this concept in the PRC’s foreign policy culture and official discourse. According to Chen Yugang, ‘most Chinese people could not picture China in a hegemonic

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<sup>211</sup> Liu Zhenmin, ‘Following the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Jointly Building a Community of Common Destiny’, *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol.13, No.3 (2014), pp. 478-79

<sup>212</sup> Marcus Power and Giles Mohan, ‘Towards a Critical Geopolitics of China’s Engagement with African Development’, *Geopolitics*, Vol.15, No.3 (2015), pp. 462-495

<sup>213</sup> ‘Never Seek Hegemony – China’s Voice at the UN General Assembly’, *Global Times*, 6 July 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1227967.shtml>

<sup>214</sup> Evan S. Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior. Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification* (Santa Barbara, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 14

<sup>215</sup> Chen Zheng, ‘China Debates’, p. 351

<sup>216</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, pp. 106-110

position. This kind of culture and mood is in accordance with China's official policy of not seeking hegemony.'<sup>217</sup>

The anti-hegemonic discourse is well-rooted into the early history of the PRC. Mao was a vehement advocate for China's central role in the anti-hegemonic fight of the global proletariat,<sup>218</sup> a view that was impregnated with the early revolutionary spirit:

The victory of the Chinese people has proved to the world that by following correct revolutionary lines colonial or semi-colonial peoples can defeat their imperialist rulers and gain true national independence. The Chinese people have behind them a 110-year history of struggle against imperialism.<sup>219</sup>

Even the evolution of Mao's worldview reflected the centrality of the PRC's anti-hegemonic stance. At first, after WWII, Mao divided the world into "two camps" headed by the United States and the Soviet Union, with China sitting in the middle. If in the immediate aftermath of its revolutionary foundation, the PRC leaned towards the Soviet camp, in the 1960s, Mao developed a more robust anti-hegemonic worldview represented by the idea of the 'two intermediate zones' within which creating a united front in opposition to the two hegemonies. As described by Zhang, in the 1960s and 1970s, Mao recentred his anti-hegemonism towards the USSR on the basis that 'Soviet expansionism had become the main threat to China.'<sup>220</sup> It is in this broader context that, according to Harnisch, the PRC took auxiliary roles, such as an *anti-Soviet hegemonic role* and later an *active promoter of a united front against the hegemony of the two superpowers role*.<sup>221</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are also framed by the PRC's authorities as the Chinese response to the hegemonism of the superpowers:

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<sup>217</sup> Chen Yugang, 'China's Role in the Transformation of the International System', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 122

<sup>218</sup> Harnisch, 'China's Historical Self', p. 42

<sup>219</sup> Extracts from "China's revolution and the struggle against colonialism", *People's China*, 1, 4, 16 February 1950, pp. 4-5 quoted in Robert Simmons, 'China's Foreign Relations Since 1949' edited by Alan Lawrence (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 155

<sup>220</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy', pp. 138-139

<sup>221</sup> See, Shih Chih-yu, *China's Just World: The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993)

The Five Principles were a direct response to developing countries' appeal against imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism, and reflected the aspirations of those countries for independence, autonomy, self-improvement and development.<sup>222</sup>

Deng Xiaoping made the anti-hegemonic discourse a key theme of his foreign policy. In 1982, describing the PRC's foreign policy at the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Perez de Cuellar, Deng stated that:

China's foreign policy is consistent and can be summed up in three sentences. First, we oppose hegemonism. Second, we safeguard world peace. Third, we are eager to strengthen unity and cooperation, or what might be termed 'union and cooperation', with other Third World countries. The reason I lay special emphasis on the Third World is that opposition to hegemonism and safeguarding world peace are of special significance to the Third World. Who are the victims of hegemonism? Is it the United States or the Soviet Union? No, it is the United States and the Soviet Union that practise hegemonism, so they are not the victims. Neither are developed countries such as Japan, Canada, and countries in Europe and Oceania the victims. Eastern Europe suffers a little. If world peace is disrupted, who will be the first to become victims? Actually, there has been no peace since the end of World War II. Although no major wars have been fought, minor ones have continued. Where are the minor wars fought? In the Third World! It is the superpowers that practise hegemonism and sow discord.<sup>223</sup>

Yet, he made abundantly clear that, while denouncing the hegemonism and imperialism perpetrated by the superpowers and thus aligning China with the struggle of other Third World countries, the PRC was not seeking the role of the hegemon of the anti-hegemonic camp:

Many friends claim that China is the leader of the Third World. However, we say that China cannot be the leader, because acting as the leader will breed adversity. Those who practise hegemonism are discredited, so serving as the leader of the Third World would earn us a bad reputation. These are not words of modesty. I say this out of genuine political consideration.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Liu, 'Following the Five Principles', p.477

<sup>223</sup> Deng Xiaoping, Excerpt from a talk with Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 21 August 1982, <https://dengxiaopingworks.wordpress.com/2013/02/25/chinas-foreign-policy/>

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

Deng's words were embedded in the re-articulation that China's foreign policy faced during the 1980s. When in March 1986, the Chinese government inked its independent foreign policy, anti-hegemonism was again a core theme: 'The fundamental goal of China's diplomatic work is to oppose hegemony, maintain world peace, develop friendly cooperation with other nations and promote common economic prosperity.'<sup>225</sup>

Notably, Peter Van Ness describes the Chinese view of the post-Cold War international system as fundamentally different from that of the Western world. In his interpretation, in fact, China does not perceive the international system as anarchic but, in contrast, as hegemonic: Such a hierarchical world order is 'structured in terms of a combination of US military-strategic hegemony and a globalised economic interdependence.'<sup>226</sup> Against this backdrop, China's official foreign policy narrative remains locked to the idea that 'by following the concept of peaceful development, the PRC can help move global (economic) governance beyond Western domination towards a new system based on multi-polarity.' This leadership role, however, is by no means equivalent to replacing US hegemony with a Chinese one, '[y]et China's development strategy should not lead to a new hegemony, but rather to a system with collective leadership, as global governance without leadership would be inefficient.'<sup>227</sup> Therefore, the pledge of opposing hegemony while never seeking hegemony remains an element of strong continuity in the PRC's foreign policy discourse even in the twenty-first century. Xi Jinping, in fact, commonly reiterates Deng's renewed slogan that China is committed to "never seek hegemony", suggesting that this remains a cornerstone principle of the Chinese foreign policy despite the changes in the international system.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy', p. 145

<sup>226</sup> Peter Van Ness, Hegemony, not anarchy: why China and Japan are not balancing US unipolar power, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2002, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2002), p.132

<sup>227</sup> Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, 'China's Role in International Institutions. The Case of Global Economic Governance', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 130

<sup>228</sup> 'Never Seek Hegemony – China's Voice at the UN General Assembly', *Global Times*, 6 July 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1227967.shtml>



### **Other concepts: independent foreign policy and win-win partnerships**

Two other concepts that inform the ideational dimension of China's role vis-à-vis Iran are the PRC's claim of performing an independent foreign policy and the idea of promoting win-win cooperation through equal partnerships rather than through alliances. Both concepts are intimately connected and coherently reflect the brother orientation of the Chinese foreign policy discourse.

Even though Zou Enlai first introduced the concept at the 1955 Bandung Conference,<sup>229</sup> Deng Xiaoping formally presented the Chinese foreign policy as independent and committed to peace in the early 1980s. The formulation of an "independent foreign policy of peace" broadly reflected the PRC's desire to be perceived as a non-aligned country whose foreign policy is guided by the spirit and lessons of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.<sup>230</sup> As officially exposed by the Chinese government in 1986, "China affirms its independence and autonomy, and will make its own decisions on what positions and measures to adopt on international issues"<sup>231</sup> – a position that does not preclude the opportunity of pursuing good relations with the other great power,<sup>232</sup> while defending the PRC's right to perform a foreign policy that responds to its interests.<sup>233</sup> Overall, the concept of independent foreign policy remains a central pillar of the PRC's current foreign policy.

The idea of pursuing an independent foreign policy fundamentally different from the other great powers provides a valuable justification for the PRC's preference for building partnerships rather than alliances. As described by Sun Degang:

As a socialist power, China would like to seek 'glorious isolation'. In the meantime, Beijing has chosen to transcend its political and ideological differences with the target countries, establishing a network of partnerships on the basis of 'marriage without

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<sup>229</sup> Pei Jianzhang, ed., *Studying Zhou Enlai: Diplomatic Thoughts and Practice*, p. 5.

<sup>230</sup> See, Joshua Eisemann, Eric Heginbotham, Derek Mitchell (eds.), *China and the Developing World: Beijing's Strategy for the Twenty-first Century* (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 17-18; Xu Hong, 'The Chair's Summary of the Colloquium'

<sup>231</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy'

<sup>232</sup> See, Deng Xiaoping, Speech at an Enlarged Meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 4 June 1985

<sup>233</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy'

licence' and 'seeking common ground while reserving differences', which is also consistent with China's diplomatic philosophy of non-alignment.<sup>234</sup>

As explained by Marc Lanteigne, it was since the 1990s, under the presidency of Jiang Zemin, 'that China sought a policy of bilateral "partnerships" (*huoban guanxi* 伙伴关系), as well as increased multilateral cooperation through international organisations, which stressed political and often economic cooperation.'<sup>235</sup> The PRC values partnerships, instead of alliances, because of their non-confrontational outlook: rather than targeting third countries through the security/defensive dimension that is attached to the concept of alliance, the partnership's framework allows the PRC to develop broader and multi-faced cooperation with the target country.<sup>236</sup> In that sense, pursuing partnerships rather than alliances allows China to maintain a degree of flexibility that appears consistent with the foreign policy narratives of independence, non-alignment, and opposition to hegemony. Conceptually, the idea of partnership fits with the broader principle of Chinese foreign policy that 'all countries are equal, whether they are large or small, rich or poor, and strong or weak,'<sup>237</sup> and thus the opportunity and the ultimate goal is that of fostering mutual development and promoting win-win cooperation.<sup>238</sup> In relations to the Five Principles, Liu Zhenmin considers '[t]he concept of win-win progress, [as] the ultimate objective of the Five Principles. To achieve win-win progress, countries need to engage in mutually beneficial international cooperation on the basis of equality.'<sup>239</sup> The concept of win-win cooperation has then become one of the critical pillars of the One Belt One Road initiative (later known as the Belt and Road Initiative) since its launch in 2013.

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<sup>234</sup> Sun Degang, 'China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East', *The Asia Dialogue*, 24 March, 2020, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2020/03/24/chinas-partnership-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>235</sup> Lanteigne, Chinese Foreign Policy, p.28

<sup>236</sup> See, Harris, 'China's Foreign Policy', p. 52; Georg Strüver, 'China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.10, No.1 (2017)

<sup>237</sup> Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy'

<sup>238</sup> See, Eisemann et al., China and the Developing World, pp. 17-18; Zhang Baijia, 'Changes in Diplomatic Philosophy'

<sup>239</sup> Liu, 'Following the Five Principles', p.479

### **The corresponding ideational dimension of the IRI's foreign policy**

One of the most intriguing aspects of the PRC-IRI relationship is the almost perfect overlapping of some of the critical ideational concepts on the *shelves* of both countries' foreign policymakers and thinkers. As already acknowledged, some fundamental differences exist at the core of China and Iran's foreign policy principles: Above all, the Islamic component that permeates the IRI's external projection is counterposed to the PRC's socialist identity. Nonetheless, the existence of a relevant body of correspondent concepts in the IRI's foreign policy makes the ideational component of China's role vis-à-vis Iran particularly salient and, to a certain extent, unique. The present section aims at presenting those concepts.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran makes two significant references to foreign policy in the articles 152 and 153:

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, the preservation of the complete independence and territorial integrity of the country, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non- belligerent states.<sup>240</sup>

Any form of agreement resulting in foreign domination over the natural resources, economy, army or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of the national life, is forbidden.<sup>241</sup>

The abovementioned articles include all the principles that sit at the ideational core of the IRI's foreign policy and constitute the corresponding concepts recalled in the interaction with China. According to Mahdi Mohammad Nia, the foreign policy discourse of the Islamic Republic is formed by several fundamental defining principles, which include: "non-domination, independence, resistance, anti-arrogance campaign, nationalism, Islamic unity, and responsibility which all have been articulated around the nodal point of anti- western revolutionary identity."<sup>242</sup> Notably, the 'anti-western revolutionary identity' of the IRI is the direct result of

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<sup>240</sup> Article 152 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

<sup>241</sup> Article 153 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

<sup>242</sup> Mahdi Mohammad Nia, 'Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol.3, No.3 (2012), p. 37

the 1979 Revolution, which “transformed Iranian identity from a status quo pro-western to a revolutionary anti-western one.”<sup>243</sup> From that point on, the Western identity has worked as a negative point of reference of the Iranian foreign policy, which identified it as an external threat.<sup>244</sup> According to Ali Ansari, “the first decade of the [Iranian] revolution can be characterized as the era of confrontation and counter-hegemony, in terms of identifying and reaffirming a cultural space between the West and Islamic Iran.”<sup>245</sup> Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, on his side, tends to speak about Iran’s foreign policy as revisionist, identifying the central tenets of the IRI’s revisionism as Islamic ideology, Third Worldism and the search for justice.<sup>246</sup> The latter two are compatible with the Chinese foreign policy principles presented in this chapter. Then, a core element in the ideational component of China’s role vis-à-vis Iran is the typical glorification of the past. According to R.K. Ramazani,

For Iran, the past is always present. A paradoxical combination of pride in Iranian culture and a sense of victimization have created a fierce sense of independence and a culture of resistance to dictation and domination by any foreign power among the Iranian people. Iranian foreign policy is rooted in these widely held sentiments.<sup>247</sup>

Ramazani adds that Iranians celebrate a past in which they established the “first world state” and organised ‘the first international society that respected the religions and cultures of the people under their rule,’ while, at the same time, they make explicit references to the foreign dominations they faced over the centuries.<sup>248</sup>

Directly linked to the anti-hegemonic and non-aligned posture of the IRI’s foreign policy, the concept of independence constitutes a linchpin of Iran’s external projection. According to Homeira Moshirzadeh, the IRI’s independence-seeking discourse is built upon three main foundations, namely the country’s glorious past, the victimisation faced by the encounter with foreign powers, and the (semi)-

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>245</sup> Ali M. Ansari, ‘Civilizational Identity and Foreign Policy: The Case of Iran’, in Brenda Shaffer (ed.), *The Limits of Culture. Islam and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 251

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>247</sup> R.K. Ramazani, ‘Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy, in The Iranian Revolution at 30’, *The Middle East Institute’s Viewpoints Special Edition*, (2008), p.12

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

colonial/imperial encounter.<sup>249</sup> The “Neither East, nor West” slogan that fuelled the 1979 Islamic Revolution made clear that the revolutionary politics of IRI was embedded in the Cold War power dynamics as much as it valued and pursued national independence. As described by Sadegh Zibakalam:

Many Iranians perceived the Islamic Revolution as a “third way” between Western capitalism and Eastern communism. The great slogan of the revolution “*na sharghi, na gharbi*” (neither the East nor the West) reflected the conviction that Islamic Iran would be a truly independent state — independent from both Western and Soviet domination.<sup>250</sup>

The 1979 Revolution marked Iran’s rejection of the Shah’s close alignment with the United States. Still, it also rejected the superpower's dominance in favour of the pursuit of an independent foreign policy, demonstrating a significant overlap with the PRC’s foreign policy discourse during the Cold War. The IRI’s rejection of the influence of the superpowers is intimately connected with a broader critique of the unjust and unfair nature of the international order. In that regard, Iran has focused part of its discourse on the absolute value and protection of national sovereignty, which ‘would refrain [powerful government] from interference in the internal affairs of other countries and recognise the interests and sovereignty of weaker countries.’<sup>251</sup> Concurrently, the Islamic Republic has pointed towards the permanent membership and the veto right of the five nuclear powers in the United Nations Security Council as a manifestation of the inequality – and thus the intrinsic injustice – of the Cold War and post-Cold War international systems.<sup>252</sup>

### **The anti-hegemonism of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Being expressed in article 152 of the Constitution, the concept of anti-hegemonism is a cornerstone of the IRI’s foreign policy. According to Moshirzadeh, the concept sustains Iran’s identity as an independent state.<sup>253</sup> On his side, Firooz-Abadi

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<sup>249</sup> Homeira Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy.” *Security Dialogue*, 38(4), 2007, p.529

<sup>250</sup> Sadegh Zibakalam, Iranian “Exceptionalism”, p.86

<sup>251</sup> Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, *The Islamic Republic of Iran and the ideal international system*, in Ehteshami and Molavi, p.48

<sup>252</sup> *ibid*, p.47

<sup>253</sup> Homeira Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations”, p.529

indicates that the IRI's professed anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-hegemonism is part of a broader Third-Worldism that is one of the sources of revisionism within Iran's foreign policy.<sup>254</sup> The anti-hegemonic nature of the IRI's foreign policy behaviour emerged since the beginning of the 1979 Revolution:

In the early days of the Islamic Revolution, the concepts of "Counter-Hegemonism," "Anti-Arrogance Campaign" had been crystallised in the policy of the "Neither East, nor West, [only] an Islamic Republic" that was considered as the Iranian version of "non-Alignment."<sup>255</sup>

The "Neither East, nor West" slogan was deeply embedded in – and a reaction to – the bipolar system of the Cold War. In that sense, it is essential to notice that anti-hegemonism and anti-imperialism of the IRI, while, as explained later, mainly targeted the United States, were developed as a reaction to and rejection of the superpowers' domination. As summarised by Houman Sadri:

Revolutionary Iranian leaders had four major policy objectives in declaring non-alignment: (1) to achieve autonomy in foreign policymaking, (2) to avoid a costly involvement in the American-Soviet rivalry, (3) to end Iran's dependence on one ideological camp, and (4) to improve ties with all states (except Israel and the former South African regime).<sup>256</sup>

The end of the Cold War did not change much of Iran's broader anti-hegemonic discourse. In fact, according to Nia, the vision of the Islamic Republic, including that of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, is the 'the post-Cold War international system is an example of the hegemonic order in which the US tries to impose its superpower domination over other countries, including Iran.'<sup>257</sup>

One of the key strategies used by the IRI to advance its anti-hegemonic aspirations has been the tentative creation of anti-hegemonic alliances and anti-

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<sup>254</sup> Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, 'Iran and the Ideal International System', in Ehteshami and Molavi (eds.), *Iran and the International System* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012), p. 52

<sup>255</sup> See Nia, 'Discourse and Identity', p. 50

<sup>256</sup> Houman A. Sadri, 'An Islamic Perspective on Non-Alignment: Iranian Foreign Policy in Theory and Practice', *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol.16, No 2 (1999), p. 31

<sup>257</sup> Nia, 'Discourse and Identity', p. 50

imperialist axes with like-minded countries in the developing world.<sup>258</sup> As described by Ratus and Furtig, this has resulted in the development of these ‘South-South alliances’ with countries such as the South American states of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, which all share with the Islamic Republic the militant discontent towards the unjust distribution of power in the current international system<sup>259</sup> and the United States specifically. In that context, as Zibakalam elucidates:

Iran has become increasingly active not only in regional organisations but also in those sharing similar values, such as the global struggle against hegemony. This can be seen in its active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77.<sup>260</sup>

The United States is the main target of the anti-hegemonic, anti-imperialist discourse in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>261</sup> As described by Penelope Kinch, in Iran, ‘revolutionary anti-Americanism was “fuelled by memories of US intervention in Iranian politics” and was a form of “legacy anti-Americanism.”’<sup>262</sup> Both Gary Sick and K.N. Ramazani highlight how US involvement in the 1953 coup that overthrew the Mossadeq government not only formed vivid mythology in the mind of the Iranians but also propelled part of the revolutionary impulse of 1978/1979.<sup>263</sup> As per Ramazani:

The fact that the United States aborted Iranian democratic aspirations in 1953 by overthrowing the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddeq, returned the

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<sup>258</sup> See, Nia, ‘Discourse and Identity’, pp. 41-42; Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, ‘Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran’s Foreign Policy’, *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.20, No.3 (2008), p. 19; Firooz-Abadi, ‘Iran and the Ideal International System’, p. 55

<sup>259</sup> Susanne Ratus and Henner Furtig, “Iran and Venezuela: Bilateral alliance and global power projections.”, FRIDE, 2009

<sup>260</sup> Sadegh Zibakalam, Iranian “Exceptionalism”, p.86

<sup>261</sup> The epithet “Great Satan” is often used by the Iranian authorities in reference to the United States, while the epithet of “Little Satan” is implied in reference to Israel. Notably, the Ayatollah Khomeini called the Soviet Union the “Lesser Satan” – a further testimony of the non-alignment dimension of Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy during the Cold War.

<sup>262</sup> Penelope Kinch, *The US- Iran Relations. The Impact of Political Identity on Foreign Policy* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2016), p. 67

<sup>263</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America’s Fateful Encounter with Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1985), p. 7

autocratic Shah to the throne, and thereafter dominated the country for a quarter century is deeply seared into Iran's collective memory.<sup>264</sup>

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the United States has become a constant reference within Iran's domestic and foreign policy discourses, constituting a seemingly unescapable source of negative identification.<sup>265</sup> According to William Beeman, in post-Revolutionary Iran, Washington is identified as 'an external illegitimate force which continually strove to destroy the pure, internal core of the Islamic Revolution.'<sup>266</sup> In more practical terms, the IRI has focused a large chunk of its foreign policy discourse on the rejection of Washington's military presence in the Persian Gulf, which goes hand in hand with Tehran's claim of a leadership role in the region.<sup>267</sup> Noteworthy, the rejection of external dominance in the Persian Gulf is one of the critical themes of the Sino-Iranian mutual understanding.

### **The Sino-Iranian anti-hegemonic partnership**

The characterisation of their relationship as informed by a common anti-hegemonic theme has been a constant, substantially unvaried reference through the history of PRC-IRI relations. As fully explored by Garver in his work, the Chinese delegations that visited Iran through the decades always included abundant references to the anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist struggle in their discourse, changing the emphasis and targets accordingly to the evolving regional and global political situation. Notably, the saliency of the anti-hegemonic theme pre-dated the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In fact, during the first visit of a high-ranking Chinese delegation to Iran in 1973, guided by the Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei, the rhetoric was already on full display.<sup>268</sup> Another strictly related theme that emerged from Ji's visit to Iran was that China supported the idea that affairs in the Persian Gulf should 'be managed by the countries and people of that region' and that

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<sup>264</sup> Ramazani, 'Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy', p. 12

<sup>265</sup> See, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 163

<sup>266</sup> William O. Beeman, 'Double Demons: Cultural Impedence US-Iranian Understanding', in Miron Rezun (ed.), *Iran at the Crossroads: Global Relations in a Turbulent Decade* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p. 165

<sup>267</sup> See Kinch, *The US- Iran Relations*, p.68

<sup>268</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.50



external powers should refrain from exerting influence and interfering.<sup>269</sup> At that point, China's primary concern in the Persian Gulf was the USSR. Interestingly enough, Garver notes that during the Shah epoch, Iran 'was not willing to allow Iran-China friendship to sour Iranian-Soviet relations'. Thus, Iranian authorities were rather chill at endorsing the Chinese calls for a united anti-hegemonic front.<sup>270</sup>

Iran's tone changed after the instalment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. During the first high-ranking reciprocal visits, the PRC and IRI's officials began to present themselves as a bearer of a 'common stand in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism.' sharing the common principles of both being "neither West, nor East" and independent. The theme of a united Third World front was also re-launched, this time with more passion and emphasis on the Iranian side.<sup>271</sup> According to Garver, the anti-hegemonic dimension of the Sino-Iranian partnership had its highest point in the first half of the 1990s. Indeed, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the US unipolar moment were natural triggers for relaunching the anti-hegemonic struggle. In July 1991, the Supreme Leader Khamenei told the Chinese premier Li Peng that the Third World country 'should have closer cooperation with each other to resist the US drive for "absolute domination."' <sup>272</sup> In the face of the increasingly harsh Iran policy of the Clinton administration, China's rhetoric remained supportive of Tehran, highlighting the recurring theme of independence, non-interference, and opposition to the hegemonic attempts of the United States. In the Twenty-first Century, the anti-hegemonic theme was not dismissed. For instance, When Jiang Zemin visited Iran, along with four other countries, in 2002, an editorial published by the PRC-owned newspaper Wen Wei Po claimed that '[u]nder the pretext of counter-terrorism, the US has stepped up the unilateralist global strategy layout [...], calling "dissenting forces" as "axis of evil countries."' The editorial stated that the US was pursuing "imperial hegemonism."<sup>273</sup> In a public forum held in December 2012, amid the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, the influential former Chinese Ambassador to Iran, Hua

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<sup>269</sup> 'Chinese Foreign Minister Honored at Tehran Dinner', Xinhua, June 14, 1973, cmp-scmp-73-26, June 25-29, 1973, 72-75 as quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.51

<sup>270</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.53

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, pp.76-79

<sup>272</sup> Note 41 quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.107

<sup>273</sup> Quoted in John W. Garver, 'China-Iran Relations: Cautious Friendship with America's Nemesis', *China Report*, Vol.49, No.1 (2013), p. 72

Liming, declared that ‘China’s economic interests [with Iran] cannot be “kidnapped” by US hegemony.’<sup>274</sup> Notably, the main target of China’s anti-hegemonic discourse vis-à-vis Iran changed over time. In the 1970s, it was focused on the Soviet Union; during the 1980s, following the 1979 Revolution, the IRI attempted to re-centre the discourse towards Washington’s hegemonism and the support for the Palestinian cause, finding that China was less keen to embrace this shift fully and instead preferred to foster its adherence to an independent foreign policy. The tone further changed with the end of the Cold War, when first the US unipolar moment and then the emergence of an increasingly multipolar system in the 2000s offered new opportunities for China and Iran to relaunch the anti-hegemonic dimension of their partnership.

### **The Sino-Iranian *civilisational solidarity***

In his paramount work on China-Iran relations, Professor John W. Garver opens his treatise with the definition of what he calls ‘[t]he spirit of Sino-Iranian relations’. The evidence that prompted Garver’s urgency is still valid – and perhaps even more vital – a decade and a half after the publication of his manuscript:

When delving into Sino-Iranian relations, one quickly encounters an abundance of rhetoric about ancient civilisations, millennia of friendly interactions, common oppression at Western hands, and so on. One also encounters expressions of esteem for the other’s influence.<sup>275</sup>

Such spirit is embodied in what Garver calls *civilisational solidarity*, a term that encapsulates two fundamental components. On one side, the word “civilisational” reflects the idea of a relationship between two subjects freed from the contingency of specific political regimes and historical junctures. But in doing so, it blurs the boundaries set by the material interests that are the fundamental trigger of Sino-Iranian relations. On the other, the idea of “solidarity” contains the element of commonality – derived from a shared experience of injustice – upon which mutual help is justified as the most natural consequence of historical empathy. Furthermore, China and Iran commonly frame their historical interactions as

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<sup>274</sup> Quoted in Garver, ‘China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations’, p. 135

<sup>275</sup> Garver, *China and Iran Relations*, p. 3

peaceful, notably absent of conflicts between their empires, and sealed by occasional strategic cooperation.<sup>276</sup>

In Garver's findings, Iran's location within the Chinese foreign policy elites' thinking is associated with the "national humiliation" experienced by China – a condition that the Iranians can empathise with and has several relevant similarities with their historical experience. This is translated into several discrete positions used to 'frame "Iran" as part of China's national humiliation narrative.'

1. Iran, like China, is a brilliant, accomplished non-Western nation every bit the equal of Western nations over the sweep of human history and with no reasons to feel inferior to, or act deferentially toward Western nations.
2. Iran, like China, was aggressed against and humiliated by Western powers, and both nations understand the bitterness of that experience.
3. The same Western nations that humiliated China and Iran in the modern era still aspire today to keep them weak and for this reason are unhappy about close cooperation between them.'
4. A world free from Western hegemonism will include a strong and rich cooperative relation between China and Iran.
5. In a world free from the aftermath of China's and Iran's national humiliation, the status of each in each respective region would be much greater than it is at present, and the role of arrogant Western powers in those regions would be correspondingly reduced.<sup>277</sup>

The two components of the spirit of China-Iran relations are civilisation and *power*. The former mainly refers to the shared condition of lost greatness: China and Iran have been 'great, powerful nations that had created empires controlling vast regions of West and East Asia.'<sup>278</sup> Yet, they both reached their nadir at the hands of the West. Significantly, Garver notes that this trauma has been enhanced by the belief

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p.20

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p.5

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p.8

that the two civilisations have been at the forefront in ‘the areas of art, architecture, philosophy, technology, religion, and government’ before being surpassed and thus humiliated by the West in the modern era.<sup>279</sup> This sits at the base of a shared revisionist tension directed towards the Western-shaped and dominated international order:

A corollary of common pride in ancient accomplishment and resentment of treatment by the West is determination by both Iran and China to restore their well-deserved high international status destroyed by putative humiliation at Western hands.<sup>280</sup>

The second component, *power*, refers to the mutual acknowledgement of possession of ‘capabilities superior to those of most of the other states in their respective regions.’<sup>281</sup> This element is interesting because despite reflecting eminently material capabilities, it is the very fact that national power is a constant reference within the Sino-Iranian mutual discourse that makes *power* a core element of the spirit of the relationship. In other words, what stands as the spirit of Sino-Iranian relations is the appreciation of traumatic, comparable historical experiences and the acknowledgement of a shared interest in building a steady relationship with a country that is considered powerful and thus influential.

Ultimately, the rhetoric of civilisational solidarity works as a lubricant of Sino-Iranian cooperation.<sup>282</sup> As such, it becomes prominent when the relationship between the two countries reaches critical junctures: ‘the more prominent the interaction, or the more difficult the situation [...], the greater the use of this civilisational rhetoric.’<sup>283</sup> Thus, while not being the trigger of cooperation, civilisational solidarity provides both the ideational and emotional foundation for Sino-Iranian relations. Still, it also serves as a tool in the hands of the two powers.

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p.9

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p.3

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

## **From *civilisational solidarity* to the ideational dimension of China's role in Sino-Iranian relations**

Garver makes immediately apparent in his description of civilisational solidarity that, while working as a lubricant, it has never been – and will never be – the trigger of cooperation between China and Iran. In fact, concrete interests are the driver of Sino-Iranian relations:

Ideas of civilisation and power have deeply influenced the thinking of both China and Iran about their mutual relationship. Perceived interests of state and nation that constitute the substance of each country's foreign policy toward the other *cannot* be derived directly from considerations of either civilizational or state power. Yet the complex of ideas associated with each of these overarching concepts forms the *context* of each side's consideration of interest and derivative policies towards the other.<sup>284</sup>

If we look – as Garver did in his paramount study – at the historical developments of China-Iran relations from the standpoint of what alternatively drives Beijing and Tehran closer or takes them apart, then it is indisputable that national interests are the cornerstone of the relationship. Conversely, it will be naïve to attribute the power to define the trajectory of Sino-Iranian relations to ideational convergences.

Nonetheless, if we change the optic towards the description of China's role vis-à-vis Iran, then the complex of ideas behind the Sino-Iranian relation assumes a renewed centrality. In fact, in the model I propose in this thesis, the ideational dimension exists and works in conjunction with its structural equivalent to define the perimeter within which China's role-taking and role-enactment processes happen. The conglomerate of ideas, self and reciprocal images, and compatible visions of the world form *The World in [the] Minds* of China and Iran when they encounter each other. Such a *world* is a fundamental component of China's role vis-à-vis Iran since it both provides the ideational vocabulary through which concrete interests are translated into policies and the rhetorical and emotional tool that comes to rescuing the role when policies diverge from the expectations. Ultimately, the ideational dimension is one of the elements that define the perimeter – in Garver's words, the *context* – within which China and Iran derive interest-based policies.

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p.6

Yet, it becomes a defining element of the People's Republic's role in the partnership with the Islamic Republic.

**Intervening dyad: China's relations with the developing world as a *significant other***

Sino-Iranian relations are naturally located within the broader sphere of China's relations with the developing world. This relational dyad adds further context to the ideational discourse of Beijing's role vis-à-vis Iran. Therefore, the *shelf* from which the PRC picks the ideational tools to pursue its role vis-à-vis the IRI is part of the broader *library* of Sino-developing world relations. Ultimately, the developing world represents one of the significant others of China's role in the relations with Iran. The People's Republic's rhetorical reference to the developing world was strictly connected with the PRC's self-projection as a developing country and thus part of the Third World. As described by Lilian Craig Harris and Robert L. Worden in what still is a seminal study of Sino-Third World relations,

China has no doubts about its Third World credentials. On every appropriate occasion, whether greeting a developing nation's head of state, reporting to the National People's Congress, or addressing the UN General Assembly, Beijing's leaders and spokesmen unambiguously assert that China is a member of the Third World.<sup>285</sup>

This self-identification as a developing country has turned into a fundamental feature of the PRC's foreign policy, given that, especially during the Cold War, it provided China with an audience potentially ready to share and support its quest for independence from the two superpowers. Also, it allowed China to empathise with that audience, mixing itself with the other developing country under the claim of a shared historical experience and “non-Westernness”<sup>286</sup> Sino-Third World relations constituted an element of substantial continuity despite the leadership changes since the establishment of the PRC, encapsulating some of the Chinese most fundamental foreign policy goals: ‘achievement of national security and international recognition of China's rightful position of prominence and authority.’<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Harris and Worden, *China and the Third World*, p. 1

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*; Scarlett Cornelissen and Ian Taylor, ‘The Political Economy of China and Japan Relationship with Africa: A Comparative Perspective’, *Pacific Review*, Vol.13, No.4 (2000)

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3-4

As further testimony of the centrality and continuity of this self-projection in Chinese foreign policy, the PRC's conception of its relationship with the Third World/developing world evolved through time to adapt itself to the changing domestic and external conditions. From the early 1950's Mao Zedong developed his own worldview, initially putting China in an "intermediate zone" between the two superpowers. Mao's call was for a united front of those independent countries part of the intermediate zone to fight against Washington's imperialism<sup>288</sup>. The 1960s, in concomitance with the Sino-Soviet split, represented the highest point of China's militant support for the radical movements in the Third World<sup>289</sup>. In 1965, celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the China-Japan war, the Chinese military leader Lin Biao presented an interesting worldview: North America and Western Europe are the "cities of the world", while Asia, Africa, and Latin America are the countryside.<sup>290</sup> In one of his most famous discourses in front of the UN General Assembly, Deng Xiaoping told the world that China was a developing country that belonged to the Third World and was radically different from the two superpowers. Ultimately, Deng located China in the camp of the revolutionary nations of the Third World, which rejected and fought against imperialism, hegemony, and dependence.<sup>291</sup> Deng's vision was the continuation of Mao's Three Worlds Theory, which identified three distinct and contradictory groups of nations according to their socio-economic status and their hegemonic ambitions: The USSR and the United States, as imperialist and hegemonist superpowers, forms the First World; the Global North (European countries, Canada, and Japan) is the Second World; lastly, Asia, Africa, and Latin America are part of the Third World, which includes China itself.

Yet, the end of the Mao era, the beginning of the "opening-up" season, and Deng's renewed focus on China's economic relaunch imposed a redefinition of the PRC's projection towards the developing world. Van Ness goes as far as saying

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<sup>288</sup> Eisemann et al., *China and the Developing World*, p. 15

<sup>289</sup> See Donald W. Klein, *China and the Second World*; and Hoo Tiang Boon, *China's Global Identity*, p.XXI

<sup>290</sup> Bart Dessein, 'Historical Narrative, Remembrance, and the Ordering of the World', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 31-32

<sup>291</sup> 'Never Seek Hegemony – China's Voice at the UN General Assembly', *Global Times*, 6 July 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1227967.shtml>

that, in the 1980s, China attempted to ‘escape from being the Third World.’<sup>292</sup> Remarkably, it did not result in abandoning the self-identification as a developing country. Yet, Deng relaunched the idea of an “independent foreign policy of peace”, whose message was consistent with the PRC’s traditional relationship with the developing world. In fact, China signalled that, despite the reprioritisation of its relations with the United States, it was not abandoning the developing world. On the contrary, Beijing remained committed to a policy of non-alignment and based its relationship with developing countries on equality, mutual respect, and mutual economic benefit. Then, the end of the Cold War and the rise of the unipolar world presented China with the need to remodel once again the conceptualisation of this relationship: The American unipolar moment allowed the PRC to relaunch the idea of an anti-hegemonic cause, now under the guise of multilateralism. To quote Derek Mitchell and Carola McGiffert, ‘[from the 1990s], Beijing began to promote the notion of a multi-polar world to protect its interests and dilute U.S. global power and influence – a posture that resonated well in most of the developing world and led to a common cause in international organisations.’<sup>293</sup>

It is noteworthy that, when describing China’s multiple possible identities, Hoo Tiang Boon makes a clear-cut distinction between the Third World identity (*disan shijie guijia*) and that of the developing nation (*fazhan guorjia*). According to him, the former is facing a general decline, while the latter “has been comparatively consistent in Chinese identity discourse.” The two identities are often seen as overlapping, with the developing nation identity converging into the Third World one. Yet, the two are ideationally distinguishable, given that one has mainly to do with the economic sphere. At the same time, the other is intrinsically more political and brings reminiscence of the bloc politics of the Cold War.<sup>294</sup>

Finally, the issue of China’s leadership of the Third World/developing world remains crucial. In fact, it reflects the existing tension between what is attached to the PRC’s self-identification as a developing country – refusal of hegemony and promotion of equality and mutuality – and its exceptionalism which

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<sup>292</sup> Peter Van Ness, ‘China as a Third World State: Foreign Policy and Official National Identity’, in Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim (eds.), *China’s Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 212

<sup>293</sup> Eisemann et al., *China and the Developing World*, p. 15

<sup>294</sup> Hoo, *China’s Global Identity*



makes it an atypical member of the developing world. In 1982, talking with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Deng Xiaoping made clear that:

Many friends claim that China is the leader of the Third World. However, we say that China cannot be the leader, because acting as the leader will breed adversity. Those who practise hegemonism are discredited, so serving as the leader of the Third World would earn us a bad reputation. These are not words of modesty. I say this out of genuine political consideration.<sup>295</sup>

Deng's word reflects the standard Chinese discourse that vigorously denies that China claims the leadership of the Third World/developing. Stuart Harris argued that Mao 'viewed China's status as one of leadership, whether as a revolutionary state or in terms of the Third World,'<sup>296</sup> possibly reflecting the passage from the revolutionary ferment of the first two decades of the PRC to the post-Mao era. Van Ness noted that despite the prominence of the Third World/developing world in China's foreign policy discourse, the actual policy-making has been substantially divergent from that rhetorical primacy. In fact, 'there has been a fundamental contradiction between China's rhetorical role as a champion of Third World causes and Beijing's own search for wealth and power in the global system.'<sup>297</sup> Ultimately, China's role vis-à-vis the Third World/developing world points more towards that of the political champion than towards that of the leader: to use the brilliant interpretation proposed by Harris and Worden, it seems resolute considering that 'China sees itself as an adviser and facilitator to the Third World, a sort of political elder-brother posture which in fact places in a superior position.'<sup>298</sup>

### **Intervening dyad: China's great power identity and the United States**

If the Third World/developing world represents the primary *significant other* in providing a broader context to the ideational dimension of China's role vis-à-vis Iran, the China-US dyad represents a more complex and ambiguous point of reference. In fact, since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Washington

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<sup>295</sup> Deng Xiaoping, Excerpt from a talk with Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 21 August 1982

<sup>296</sup> Harris, 'China's Foreign Policy', p. 8

<sup>297</sup> Van Ness, 'China as a Third World State', pp. 151-2

<sup>298</sup> Harris and Worden, China and the Third World, p. 6

– perhaps with the notable company of Israel – has been Iran’s main ideological rival. Conversely, the Sino-US relationship has been more articulated and complex. Such complexity primarily reflects China’s great power status and the United States’ role in enabling the PRC to perform this role.

As described in great detail in Chapter 2, China is a great power. The astonishing economic development of the past decades has been the source of much of the PRC’s self-perception as great power. Yet, Hoo Tiang Boon locates China’s current great power identity in a historical continuum defined by at least three relevant precedents: ‘A civilisational complex of a “great central kingdom”; a perception of “suppressed greatness” in the late Qing and Republican eras; and post-1949 Maoist outlook of a “great power awakening.”’<sup>299</sup> Therefore, despite often concealed behind, for instance, the modesty of Deng’s era and the concurrent self-representation as a developing country different from the Cold War’s superpowers, China’s self-perception as great power appears consistent and deeply rooted. Yet, while the great power status defines the structural dimension of the PRC’s role vis-à-vis Iran, within the ideational dimension, it plays a more subtle influence. One reason is that China tends to speak about Iran and its relationship from a perspective of equality rather than superiority – a trend that, as described in this chapter, is consistent with Beijing’s projections towards the developing world.<sup>300</sup> A second one is that, interestingly enough, China’s great power identity has in the United States its most relevant *significant other*. Such an aspect contains an element of inherent friction with China’s role vis-à-vis Iran. In fact, as described by Foot and Walter, among others, Beijing perceives the United States as the “constraint” or “enabler” of its ascension to the role of great power.<sup>301</sup> In his paramount study of China’s global identity, Hoo argues that Washington is the PRC’s “doorkeeper” given its ‘status as preponderant power in international society.’<sup>302</sup> The third reason is that Beijing’s great power identity has the concept of responsibility at its cornerstone, especially after the 1990s. Again, this appears strongly linked to the US role as the primary *significant other* in China’s great

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<sup>299</sup> Hoo, *China’s Global Identity*, p. xvi

<sup>300</sup> Harris and Worden, *China and the Third World*, p. 6

<sup>301</sup> Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 19

<sup>302</sup> Hoo, *China’s Global Identity*, p. 169

power role. Yet, as noted by Hoo, the idea of being a responsible great power had its inception in Beijing's self-perception well before the US made clear its expectation for China to act as a *responsible stakeholder* formulated by Robert B. Zoellick, the US Deputy Secretary of State, in 2005.<sup>303</sup> In the 1980s, for instance, there have been the first vague indications of China's awareness of its international responsibilities and the social functionality of being a *responsible power*. An excellent example of this emerging attitude could be spotted in China's effective reluctance to use its veto power at the United Nations to champion Third World causes despite 'authoritative Chinese sources have stated strongly that China's veto power on the UN Security Council "represents the Third World."' <sup>304</sup> It was in the 1990s, though, that this self-awareness emerged more clearly and became dominant.<sup>305</sup> Ultimately, it appears that the image of China as a *responsible great power* has gained influence and prominence among the Chinese epistemic community as a counterbalance to the realist perception of China as a threat increasingly diffused among the Western elites. According to Noesselt,

If China wants to assuage any such negative perceptions harboured by outsiders, it now has to convince others that it will comply with the established rules of the game and become a norm-taker. The related self-defined image of being a "responsible power" thus imposes certain constraints on China's international engagements.<sup>306</sup>

Therefore, being a responsible member of the international society was translated into taking a constructive – rather than disruptive – role within international organisations and supporting multilateralism in addressing key security issues such as arms control and nonproliferation.<sup>307</sup> Chinese scholars appear aware of the

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<sup>303</sup> 'Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility', Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005. [https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration\\_Zoellick\\_remarks\\_notes06\\_winter\\_spring.pdf](https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration_Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf)

<sup>304</sup> Harris and Worden, *China and the Third World*, p. 5

<sup>305</sup> *ibid.*, p.49-50

<sup>306</sup> Nele Noesselt, 'China's Contradictory Role(s) in World Politics: Decrypting China's North Korea Strategy', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 7 (2014), p. 1313

<sup>307</sup> See *Ibid.*, p. 48; Bates Gill and Evan S. Medeiros, 'Foreign and Domestic Influences on China's Arms Control and Nonproliferation Policies', *China Quarterly*, Vol.161 (2000); Jacopo Scita, 'China-Iran Relations through the Prism of Sanctions', *Asian Affairs*, Vol.53 (2022)

challenges posed by the need to attach the feature of responsibility to the PRC's ascent to the great power status. For instance,

Liu Qiang sees a major conflict between China's historical role as a developing country and its new identity as a great power. If China seeks to play the latter role, it will have to shoulder more responsibilities worldwide and will be confronted with growing threat perception and fears among the other players in the global system, which perceive the country as being a challenger to the existing order. At the same time, however, only if China manages to upgrade its international status can it participate in the normative reconfiguration of the global order.<sup>308</sup>

All these aspects add layers of complexities to the ideational dimension of the China-US dyad and its impact as *significant other* in China's role-taking vis-à-vis Iran. Notably, the reluctance shown by the PRC's officials to endorse the anti-American rhetoric promoted by the IRI during the 1980s<sup>309</sup> was indicative that not only China was not keen to jeopardise its relationship with Washington to follow Iran's ideational demands, but also that, as described by Cameron Thies, Beijing was reactive to the US' altercasting, which at that time viewed China 'heading towards positive economic and political reforms.'<sup>310</sup> Yet, the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown completely changed the US perception of China, moving from altercasting the PRC as a "troubled moderniser," which was slowly but consistently embracing the Western norms and economic system, to the altercast role of the "failed moderniser." China's response was to change its consideration of the United States to the role of hegemonic power.<sup>311</sup> Unsurprisingly, the phase of Sino-Iranian relations that followed the Tiananmen crackdown and the collapse of the Soviet Union is deemed by Garver as the apogee of their anti-hegemonic partnership. A further example of the complex impact of the China-US dyad on the ideational dimension of the PRC's role vis-à-vis Iran can be found in Beijing's approach to the sanction regime imposed by the UN Security Council over Iran's nuclear program (2006-10).

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<sup>308</sup> Quoted in Noesselt, 'China's Contradictory Role(s)', p. 1312

<sup>309</sup> See Garver, China and Iran, pp. 76-80

<sup>310</sup> Thies, The US and China, p. 105

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., pp.104-105

China acted to balance the expectations related to its role as *responsible great power* and its friendly relationship with Iran. How so? Beijing did not abandon the position of considering US unilateral sanctions as hegemonic interventionism and watered down as much as possible the Security Council sanctions. Yet, it ultimately voted in favour of all the resolutions that sanctioned Iran over its illicit nuclear programme. The audience at the UNSC, which obviously included the United States, and the issue in object – an extremely sensitive nonproliferation issue – were an important occasion for China to demonstrate its constructive attitude as great power. Therefore, the enactment of its role vis-à-vis Iran was necessarily constrained within the boundaries set by the *responsible great power* role.<sup>312</sup> Overall, while not necessarily conflictual, China's great power identity appears more problematic to be translated into the ideational baggage that informs the PRC's role vis-à-vis Iran. This is partly due to the intimate bond between recognising China's great power status and the China-US relationship.

### **China-Iran relations: a non-Western friendship**

Ultimately, the ideational dimension of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran can be described as a non-Western friendship. The non-Western component contains the ideal location where the PRC and the IRI project their relations: a dimension that is *alter* – ideally more than simply geographically – in respect of the dominant powers and the subsequently Western-shaped international system. In the narrative that sustains China's *role*, Beijing and Tehran have been the victims of the hegemonic oppression perpetrated by the Western powers, which deprived the two old empires of their historical places at the apex of civilisations. In that sense, it is essential that a significant chunk of the PRC's traditional foreign policy discourse – especially after the decline of Mao's militant socialist internationalism – reflects the claims of independence, anti-hegemonism, and non-alignment that formed the backbone of the IRI's foreign policy. Based on this ideational affinity, China has successfully framed the partnership with Iran as an all-weather friendship. While this framing is not unique to the PRC's relations with Iran, in the context of the Sino-Iranian partnership, it assumes particular significance given that it reflects the IRI's quest for building anti-hegemonic partnerships with like-minded

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<sup>312</sup> See Scita, 'China-Iran Relations'

countries. Beyond this, it is also functional to compensate for Beijing's shortcomings in the performance of its *role*, which are often caused by the incompatibility between its interests in cooperating with Iran and other hierarchically superior interests that concern the PRC's regional and global projections. Furthermore, labelling the ideational dimension of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran as friendship catches the main idea behind the "civilisational solidarity" described by Garver: Beijing and Tehran frame their encounter as the product of historical, ideational, and political affinities that somehow precede the undoubtedly more cogent material and strategic interests that, ultimately, define the every-day conduct of the bilateral relations. Ultimately, depriving the description of China's *role* from this ideational dimension would result in a significant loss of complexity, undermining the task of understanding how the Sino-Iranian partnership has remained significantly resilient to the turbulence of its half-century history.

What might appear as the natural marriage between two non-Western, proudly anti-hegemonic countries is not free from significant ideational tensions. Arguably, the natural incompatibility between the Communist Republic and the Islamic Republic was tempered and fairly quickly overcome not only by Iran's compelling interest in establishing relations with one of the few great powers willing to cooperate with the new regime after the 1979 Revolution but also thanks to the pre-existence of an ideational common ground. In other words, as divergent as the political essence of China and Iran might have been in the aftermath of 1979, China had on its *shelf* a vocabulary of ideas and political experiences that appealed to the IRI sufficiently. Yet, as will be described in Chapter 5, in 1979, China and Iran were taking different paths, with the latter embarking on its revolutionary journey and the former, guided by Deng Xiaoping, entering a post-revolutionary phase in which the ultimate goal of domestic development was served by an independent foreign policy forged over complex, alternatively cooperative and competitive relations with the United States. Here the inherent and still defining tension between the IRI's unresolved transition from its original revolutionary spirit to a post-revolutionary foreign policy and the PRC's progressive addition of responsibility to the attributes of its great power status became increasingly apparent. As in the case of its structural equivalent, even the ideational component of China's *role* suffered from the inherent asymmetry of Sino-Iranian relations,

with China often unable or unwilling to respond to Iran's requests for firm ideational support in its confrontation with the United States.

## **China's role as *friendly stakeholder* in Sino-Iranian relations**

The present chapter seeks to define the role that China has taken and enacted in the partnership with Iran. The role is the product of the continuous synthesis of its two main components: the structural and ideational dimensions, as described in Chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis. It is important to note that the role that emerges from the perimeter set by the abovementioned dimensions is the ideal role – the product of the perfect overlap of the *ego* and *alter* material and ideational expectations. Using the representation of the theoretical model developed in Chapter 1, this is the case in which the two shapes, the circle and the square, are equivalent. Such a condition rarely happens. International roles are the product of continuous contestation and re-definition and are subject to intra-role and inter-role conflicts. For this reason, the conclusion of this chapter does not capture the inherent tension of performing a specific role. Yet, this task is left to Chapter 5, which explores how the ideal role defined here has faced the historical evolution of China-Iran relations.

### **Chapter outline**

The present Chapter is divided into three main sections. The first one presents a selected review of the literature that applies the role theory of international relations to the analysis of specific case studies. The works presented are chosen because of their analytical relevance for studying China's role in Sino-Iranian relations and, in most cases, the focus on bilateral (state-to-state) relations. Then, the second section narrows the perspective, reviewing China's international roles using the same broad selection criteria as section one. The objective of these two sections is to locate China's role in the partnership with Iran in the literature that applies role theory to international relations. In other words, some of the core elements extracted from the study of different international roles and the empirical applications of role theory return to the definition of the PRC's Iran *role* as elements of comparison and contrast. Eventually, the last section of the chapter is the one that defines China's ideal *role* in the relationship with Iran.



### **Empirical applications of Role Theory: international roles in practice**

Stephen Klose provides a valuable approach to the question of the regional roles played by extra-regional powers. His elaboration, however, can be applied to bilateral roles played by international actors equally. Klose explains that Role Theory, particularly the so-called interactionist role theory (IRT), is well-positioned to capture the social dynamics behind an extra-regional actor's aspiration and realisation of regional roles. Summarising the works of Harnisch, Herborth, and other scholars, Klose claims that at the IRT's core, there is

the suggestion that an international actor experiences and expresses its 'self' in society by drawing on two intertwined aspects of its agency: its 'me' and its 'I'. While an international actor's 'me' denotes its capacity to see its 'self' through the eyes of others (a process termed 'role taking'), its 'I' signifies its ability to generate spontaneous and creative impulses in reaction to the 'me'. Together, IRT suggests, these two aspects of agency enable an international actor to realise its 'self' (its identity) in society. [...] Concretely, by reverting to its reflective capacity (its 'me'), an international actor brings in mind expectations of its 'self', including the internalised expectations of specific others (so-called significant others) and society at large (the so-called generalised other).<sup>313</sup>

According to IRT, the role-making process is constituted by two components: the first phase of (re)imagination followed by one of realisation. In the first phase, the actor re-imagines its role in reaction to a relevant situation "by drawing on its interacting 'I' and 'me'."<sup>314</sup> Although IRT focuses more on the domestic dimension of an actor's re-imagination of its international role, it is crucial to notice that it does not neglect the relevance of the expectations of the significant others outside the domestic arena. Klose's example is clear: 'when the US State Department or the Republican Party generate ideas for a US role in the Middle East, for instance, then they do not only reflect the expectations of domestic actors but also on the expectations of external actors, such as regional allies.'<sup>315</sup> Once fulfilled the imagination process, in the following phase, the realisation, the actor is filled with a 'renewed purpose and direction in its interaction with significant others.' At that

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<sup>313</sup> Stephan Klose, 'The Emergence and Evolution of an External Actor's Regional Role: An Interactionist Role Theory Perspective', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 54, No.3 (2019), p. 429

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431

point, the international actor moves from the process of role-making to that of role-playing: while the latter ‘signifies the (re)constitution of an international actor’s role in response to a problematic situation, role-playing denotes the actor’s (more or less routinised) performance of an established role.’<sup>316</sup> Ultimately, according to IRT, Klose argues, ‘it is thus in response to a problematic situation that an external actor develops its aspiration to penetrate a particular region.’<sup>317</sup> Translating this claim to the bilateral level of China’s role-making in its relationship with Iran, the 1979 Revolution represents a problematic situation that posed Beijing in front of the need to reimagine its role.

Grossman’s study of the transformation of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s provides insights into the co-existence of non-cooperative and cooperative roles. In particular, among the formers, the most prominent was “anti-hegemon” – reflecting growing suspicion toward the US – followed by ‘independent player’ and “active player”, which ‘prescribed behaviour that focused on the pursuit of Russian national interests without regard for Western concerns and with an emphasis on Russian self-determination.’ Interestingly, Grossman finds that only a single role emerged as a cooperative stance with the West and the US, “member of Western world”.<sup>318</sup> During the 1990s, the cooperative role remained dominant until 1996 to decline afterwards in favour of the non-cooperative roles, a behaviour that was reflected in a progressive schism of Russian voting pattern at the UN from the US.<sup>319</sup>

Although this thesis looks at China’s role in a distinctively asymmetrical relationship in which the PRC is the stronger state, it is worth exploring the opposite case. Huang Chiung-Chiu’s study of Vietnam’s roles in its relationship with China argues that two role conceptions are shaping Vietnam’s China policy: the “independent role”, which is ego-driven and structure-oriented, counterposed to the “interactive role” that is more alter-driven, responsive, and relational-oriented.<sup>320</sup> The independent role’s main feature is ‘that such a state makes decisions based only on its national interests, and the commonly adopted strategies under this role

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p. 432

<sup>318</sup> Grossman, ‘Role Theory and Foreign Policy Change’, p. 345

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., pp. 346-347

<sup>320</sup> Huang Chiung-Chiu, ‘Interpreting Vietnam’s China policy from the perspective of role theory: independent role versus interactive role,’ *International Relations*, 34(1), (2020), p. 525

conception include commitment to the policy of nonalignment and self-determination.<sup>321</sup> According to the author, the simultaneous adoption of the interactive role conception might appear irrational since it includes ‘giving up the apparent and immediate material interests in exchange for symbolic gains, such as a keen, stable bilateral relationship with the significant other.’ Yet, ‘[s]uch pursuit of relational security remains rational, for a stable, positive relationship guarantees national security in the long run, and this is especially crucial for small states neighbouring a great power.’<sup>322</sup>

In their application of role theory to the study of the foreign policy of Middle Eastern and North African states, Yasmin Akbaba and Ozgür Ozdamar dedicate a Chapter to Iran. Specifically, their analysis focuses on the evolution of the IRI’s role conceptions before and during the Arab uprisings. The five most frequently cited roles by Iranian leaders are: “defender of Islamic Faith”, “bastion of the revolution”, “anti-imperialist agent”, “anti-American agent”, and “internal development”. Akbaba and Ozdamar describe the links between the “anti-imperialist agent” and its sub-role of “anti-American agent” in a revealing way:

The Iranian regime subscribed to anti-imperialist and anti-American rhetoric almost immediately after the revolution, which became a central part of its foreign policy until the pragmatists came to power in the late 1980s. Although the main target was the US, anti-imperialist rhetoric also targeted the USSR and some European powers, such as the UK. In related rhetoric, Iran also prescribed itself an independent-country role, which has mostly continued until the present day, except for an alliance with Syria in the early 1980s and cooperation with some other countries.<sup>323</sup>

The Arab uprising had little impact on the centrality of the “anti-imperialist agent” role in Iran’s discourse. In fact, the Western intervention in Libya, the coup in Egypt, and the Civil War in Syria allowed the IRI to relaunch it in opposition to any US and European involvement in the region.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid., p. 529

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., p. 530

<sup>323</sup> Yasmin Akbaba and Ozgür Ozdamar, ‘Iran and Shia Revolutionism’, in Akbaba Yasemin, Özdamar Özgür (eds.), *Role Theory in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 56-57

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., p. 57

Indonesia has been the subject of several applications of role theory, stimulated, for instance, by its peculiar status as the largest Muslim democracy in the world and its role in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>325</sup> Drawing on their role-based theoretical approach to the definition of middle powers, Thies and Sari conclude that Indonesia meets the criteria of what they call “middle power status”: it fulfils the auxiliary roles of “good international citizen”, “supporter of multilateralism”, and “supporter of the current international order”. Yet, they note that Indonesia failed to perform one of these auxiliary roles at a particular historical junction. Notably, they suggest that this failure reflects that achieving a specific status is not a once-for-all result, opening up the generalisable question of how and to what extent under or non-performing auxiliary roles and external expectations do influence the status gained by a particular country?<sup>326</sup> M.F. Karim provides a slightly different interpretation of Indonesia’s seek for middle power status, focusing on the country’s national role conceptions, comparing it to South Korea. According to him, ‘middle powers enact different roles in their quest for greater status at the global level. Thus, by understanding the construction of the role conceptions of middle powers, we can understand the differences in the role preferences of middle powers.’ Nonetheless, its conclusions confirm that roles are not fixed but flexible, changing while pursuing a specific status.<sup>327</sup>

Like Indonesia, Turkey has attracted the attention of scholars as a case study suitable for role theory-based analyses.<sup>328</sup> In their study on the emergence and evolution of Turkey as a role model for Middle Eastern countries – the so-called “Turkish model” –, Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen apply the three main concepts of role theory developed by Holsti in his pioneering 1970 work: role conceptions,

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<sup>325</sup> See, Anna Grzywacz, ‘Indonesia’s (Inter)national Role as a Muslim Democracy Model: Effectiveness and Conflict Between the Conception and Prescription Roles’, *The Pacific Review*, Vol.33, No.5 (2020), pp. 728-756; I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia, ‘Understanding Indonesia's Role in the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’: A Role Theory Approach’, *Asia & the Pacific Studies*, Vol.7 (2020), pp. 293–305.

<sup>326</sup> Cameron G. Thies and Angguntari C. Sari, ‘A Role Theory Approach to Middle Powers: Making Sense of Indonesia’s Place in the International System’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.40, No.3 (2018), pp. 413-414

<sup>327</sup> Moch Faisal Karim, ‘Middle Power, Status-Seeking and Role Conceptions: the Cases of Indonesia and South Korea’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.72, No.4 (2018), p. 359

<sup>328</sup> Şevket Ovah, ‘Decoding Turkey's Lust for Regional Clout in the Middle East: A Role Theory Perspective’, *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol.20, No.1 (2013), p. 1

role expectations, and role performance. Ultimately, what emerges from their study is a conclusion generalisable beyond the “Turkish model” case study: the sustainability of a role depends on the overlap between its credibility and performance in domestic and foreign policy and the expectations of the significant others.<sup>329</sup>

### **Evidence from the literature on empirical applications of role theory**

The previous section presented a list of case studies that provide a good yet not exhaustive picture of the empirical applications of role theory. Table 1 sums up the main conclusions derived from the case studies. Overall, the picture that emerges reflects the complexity of role-taking and role-performance processes, which is the most apparent consequence of the dynamism of international roles. Even in the case of significantly resilient roles, domestic and external pressures cause adjustments and re-calibration.

*Table 4.1: Main conclusions from the empirical application of Role Theory*

<i>Evidence</i>	<i>Empirical cases</i>
Role taking happens in response to ‘problematic situations’	EU role-taking in East Asia (2007)
Co-existence of cooperative and non-cooperative roles	Russia vs. US (1990s)
Co-existence of independent (ego-related) and interactive (alter-related) roles	Vietnam vs. China
International roles tend to be resilient	Iran pre vs. post Arab Uprisings Turkish model
Roles need to be credible and performed consistently	Indonesia vs. Middle Power status Turkish model
Same status but different attached roles	Indonesia vs. South Korea

The role taken and enacted by China in its relationship with Iran appears consistent with the dynamics that emerged from other case studies. The 1979 Revolution in Iran presented China with a new reality that demanded the adoption of a new role, which proved to be remarkably resilient, as will emerge in the next Chapter. Such

<sup>329</sup> Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen, ‘Reassessing the “Turkish Model” in the Post-Cold War Era: A Role Theory Perspective’, *Turkish Studies*, Vol.15, No.2 (2014), pp. 258-282,

resilience is the product of two intertwined dynamics. On one side, Beijing's ability to maintain a degree of consistency in the performance of its role in the relationship with Iran despite external pressures. On the other, Iran's inability to altercast its dissatisfaction with China's occasional role underperformance due to the asymmetry that characterises the structural dimension of the role.

### **A selected review of China's international roles**

As noted by Emilie Tran and Yahia H. Zoubir in the opening essay of a 2022 special issue on China-Mediterranean relations, since Holsti's pioneering identification of 17 national role conceptions in 1970, the spectrum of international roles has enlarged. China has added a few more roles to its menu, such as "opponent of hegemonism" and "peaceful developer".<sup>330</sup> However, China's roles are more often studied from the viewpoints of the PRC's global status (e.g., its role as a great power) and the relationship with specific international institutions and frameworks (e.g., the United Nations or the global financial market). A relevant-yet-unsurprising exception is China-US relations, which have more often been the subject of role theorists. Nonetheless, as noted by Stephen Klose, there is an abundance of literature using the term "role" to label the ensemble of policies and strategies adopted by a particular state in the interaction with a specific region (e.g., China's role in Africa or US role in East Asia). However, such use of the term "role" has, in most cases, little theoretical foundation in the various declination of the role theory of international relations.<sup>331</sup> Increasingly being the subject of policy and academic attention, China is often the subject of analyses that (ab)use the term "role". The core of the present literature review focuses on a selection of works that apply role theory to studying the PRC's bilateral and regional relations.

In the first place, it is essential to present a general overview of China's international roles. Onnig Beylerian and Christophe Canivet provide a useful chronology of the PRC's role conceptions during and after the Cold War. According to their analysis, in the first decade of its existence, the PRC had no choice other than to develop the role of junior partner and faithful ally of the USSR. Zhou Enlai, in contrast, focused on creating 'a number of secondary roles for China

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<sup>330</sup> Emil Tran and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE China in the Mediterranean: An Arena of Strategic Competition?', *Mediterranean Politics*, (2022), p.7

<sup>331</sup>Klose, 'The Emergence and Evolution', pp. 426–427

commensurate with its size, recent national experience, and global aspiration.’ This marked the PRC’s alignment with the developing world in several different roles: “supporter of national liberation”, “regional collaborator”, “anti-imperialist agent”, and “model of national liberation and independence”. Importantly, ‘through these latter two roles, Zhou’s goal was to demonstrate to colonised countries how, by learning from recent Chinese experience, they could overcome humiliation.’ Then, when the Sino-Soviet split began to emerge, Beijing found itself nourishing contrasting roles: “anti-imperialist agent” and “supporter of liberation” in front of the developing world audience and “anti-revisionist agent” ‘to gain sympathy within the international community.’ In the late 60s and 70s, with the Sino-American rapprochement in full-swing, Chinese leaders focused on performing the role of “opponent of Soviet expansionism”, which ‘now had a geopolitical meaning with China playing a balancing function in the so-called strategic triangle.’ However, Beijing kept opposing US hegemonism, although re-modelling its role toward the developing world in the form of “champion of the Third World”. With the articulation of the three worlds theory by Deng Xiaoping in 1974,

[t]o a large extent, China was taking up the fervour of Third World demands for a new international economic order and the restructuring of the international order. In propounding this role, Beijing denounced the dual hegemony of the Soviet Union and the United States. The role of *champion of Third World causes* was now accompanied by that of *active promoter* - if not leader - of a *united front against the hegemony of the two superpowers*.

Notably, in the 1970s, Chinese leaders focused their anti-hegemonic stance increasingly on the Soviet Union. The role of “promoter of a united front against Soviet hegemonism” remained central until 1982, when US support for Taiwan pushed the PRC to develop the new role of “independent actor”, which was based on three principles: ‘opposition to hegemonism, readiness to develop relations with all states based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence, and consolidation of solidarity and cooperative links with the Third World.’ According to Beylerian and Canivet, it is necessary to ascribe the changes in China’s international roles to domestic and external factors. In particular, the Sino-US rapprochement in the early 1970s marked China’s most significant change of role, having it been granted by

the United States the status of great power.<sup>332</sup> The evolution of Chinese role conceptions in the 1970s and early 1980s is particularly relevant to studying the PRC's role-taking in Sino-Iranian relations: it defines the pre-existing context of Beijing's encounter with the newly formed Islamic Republic. The role conceptions that flourished in that period appear significantly compatible with Iran's demands, making China better positioned than the other two great powers to construct a more stable relationship with the newly born IRI. In the post-Cold War period, according to Beylerian and Canivet, China kept the roles of "independent actor" and "anti-hegemonic" while increasing its commitments to international politics and expanding its foreign relations widely. According to their findings, '[t]he new element in Chinese role conceptions is that policymakers principally focused on advocating peaceful coexistence and international cooperation with all states.' Of the new roles promoted by Chinese leaders, the most relevant for this thesis is that of "consolidator of the UN", 'which signals China's growing interest in developing its presence in international organisations.'<sup>333</sup>

In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I described how, increasingly more visibly since the 1990s, China's great power identity encapsulated the idea of being "responsible" at its core. While Hoo Tiang Boon's book represents the most comprehensive study of China's "responsible great power" (RGP) identity,<sup>334</sup> the PRG has also entered the jargon of the PRC's international roles.<sup>335</sup> According to the Chinese scholar Xia Liping, what distinguish a responsible great power are the following features:

- (1) play its role in international society not only according to its national interests, but also in order to benefit regional and world peace, development, stability, and

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<sup>332</sup> Onnig Beylerian and Christophe Canivet, 'China: Role Conceptions after the Cold War,' in Philippe G. Le Prestre (ed.) *Role Quests in the Post-Cold War Era* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1997), pp.188-192

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., p.221

<sup>334</sup> Hoo, *China's Global Identity*

<sup>335</sup> See, Zhu Zhiquan, *China's New Diplomacy: Rationale, Strategies and Significance* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); Niall Duggan, 'The People's Republic of China and European Union Security Cooperation in Africa: Sino-EU Security Cooperation in Mali and the Gulf of Aden', *International Journal of China Studies* Vol.8, No 1 (2017), pp. 1-23, and Shih Chih-Yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, 'The Identity and International Role of China: Relational Grand Strategy', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015)



prosperity; (2) stake its international obligations more seriously; and (3) participate in the formulation of international rules.<sup>336</sup>

Therefore, the role of responsible great power is linked to a fundamental dynamic. As Shaun Breslin noted, although China is a dissatisfied great power acting in a world that is not of its own making, PRC's leaders 'are keen to project an image of responsibility and trustworthiness.' Ultimately, the role of "responsible great power" is instrumental for China to respond to an audience – the world with its leading actors – carefully watching and judging Beijing's rise. As Breslin recognises, the 'external perceptions of what China wants are partly driven by what China says and does – and what China says and does is partly a response to these external perceptions.'<sup>337</sup> In that regard, Gurol and Starkmann explain the change that occurred in China's role in the international cooperation on climate change during the negotiations of the 2015 Paris Agreement, which evolved from "defender of developing countries" to "policy creator" and leader, as primarily motivated by a change in external expectations and growing foreign pressure due to the growing 'dissonance between China's fast-growing economy and its low level of accountability when it comes to mitigation efforts.' Growing domestic interests indeed accompanied the exogenous pressure and ultimately led China to take a significantly more proactive role in the global environment governance.<sup>338</sup>

A few notable works have approached China's relations with specific states from the role theory perspective. The 2016's collection of essays "China's International Roles. Challenging or supporting international order", edited by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, remains the most comprehensive and articulated reflection on the PRC's international roles.<sup>339</sup> After an introductory part that sets the theoretical boundaries for studying China's roles, the books are divided into two different parts that explore, respectively, the global and regional context of Beijing's international roles. The former is opened

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<sup>336</sup> Xia Liping, 'China: A Responsible Great Power', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.10, No.26 (2001), p. 17

<sup>337</sup> Shaun Breslin, 'China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power', *Politics*, Vol.30, Issue S1 (2010), p. 53

<sup>338</sup> Julia Gurol and Anna Starkmann, 'New Partners for the Planet? The European Union and China in International Climate Governance from a Role-Theoretical Perspective', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol.59, No.3 (2021), p. 524

<sup>339</sup> Harnisch et al, *China's International Roles*

by Cameron Thies' chapter on the roles altercating process in Sino-US relations along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Thies, during the Deng Xiaoping era, 'the US explicitly chose roles for China to play – great power, troubled moderniser, and failed moderniser.' Beijing, on its part, accepted part of this direct altercating process, although rejecting the role of failed moderniser since it was a 'dishonourable role.'<sup>340</sup> Thies' essay is particularly well-positioned to clarify how deeply the relationship with the United States influences China's broader great power role.

Shifting to the regional case studies, the book's third part opens with a critical analysis of China's relations with socialist countries. Of the four case studies considered by Nele Noesselt, the transition of China's relationship with the Soviet Union to that with Russia provides an important insight. The collapse of the USSR resolved the Sino-Russian competition over the socialist identity, moving the Chinese discussion about the relationship to the framework of great power (*daguo*) relations. Per Noesselt, this implies that the great power aspirations outranked China's socialist role conception at the level of international politics.<sup>341</sup> The other three case studies presented – Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam – reinforce the idea that 'China's "socialist" role model [...] does not directly guide China's positioning and behaviour in the globalised international system.' On the contrary, the great power identity and the belonging to the "Global South" are China's dominant role conceptions.<sup>342</sup> North Korea, then, provides a significant example of China's dilemma between the role of "responsible great power" and that of "socialist power" – an inter-role conflict whose broader dynamics are easily translatable to Sino-Iranian relations. What emerges from Noesselt's study is that the PRC has updated its national role conception as a socialist country in a stream of "invented" continuity. In that context, China's "new" interpretation of socialism works both as a proposed model for North Korea to follow – and thus maintaining socialist solidarity with the neighbouring comrade alive – while also somehow distancing the PRC from the revolutionary version of socialism promoted by North Korea. Ultimately,

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<sup>340</sup> Thies, *The US and China*, p.106

<sup>341</sup> Nele Noesselt, 'China and Socialist Countries: Role Change and Role Continuity', *German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)*, (2014), p. 178

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.182-183

[t]he ambiguity of China's stance on the North Korea issue clearly indicates a persisting conflict between two layers of its national role conception: on the one hand, China seeks to be recognised as a reliable cooperative partner and equal player in world politics. Consequently, it has no interest in being seen as aligned with the group of so-called 'rogue states'. On the other hand, on a more 'ideational' level, China's own identity as a socialist one-party state obviously prevents the country from supporting actions that could trigger the downfall of the North Korean regime.<sup>343</sup>

As in the case of China's role in Sino-Iranian relations, the ambiguity of PRC's policies versus North Korea (e.g., support for nuclear-related UN sanctions while offering economic aid to Pyongyang) is best understood as the result of the coexistence of 'multiple mutually complementary (but occasionally also contradictory) national role conceptions.'<sup>344</sup> Similarly, looking at China's roles in Sino-Japanese relations, Sebastian Maslow notes the coexistence of multiple roles based on the historical victim/aggressor dichotomy, the possibility offered by economic partnership, and the recent strategic rivalry. Notably, the coexistence of these roles rather than the prevalence of one over the others has prevented Sino-Japanese relations from turning into full-scale enmity.<sup>345</sup>

Noteworthy, the relationship between China and Japan is informed by the sensitivity of historical insecurities, offering dynamics that are hardly comparable to China-Iran relations. On contrast, Beijing's roles in Africa provide a perhaps more similar case. According to Niall Duggan, up until the 1980s,

China propagated decolonisation in Africa in order to transform its own historical victimhood. During this period, China adopted a role as an all-weather friend, supporting African aspirations directly through technical assistance and indirectly by championing developing nations at the global level under the banner of South-South Cooperation.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Noesselt, 'China's Contradictory Role(s)', p. 1318

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1319

<sup>345</sup> Sebastian Maslow, 'China and Japan: Partner, Rival, and Enemy?', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015) p. 202

<sup>346</sup> Nial Duggan, 'China's Changing Role in its all-weather friendship with Africa', in Harnisch et al., *China's International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 220

In the political sphere, China has continued to pursue the role of Africa's all-weather friend, promoting a vision of equality, the defence of the developing countries' interests, and aligning itself to the position of the African Union regarding the crises in Darfur and Libya. However, the latter put China in front of a notable role dilemma. On one side, the rejection of foreign interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state is based on China's self-identification as a victim of colonialism and imperialism. On the other, the acceptance of the role of leader of the developing world, embodied by the support for the African Union and Arab League's request for a no-fly zone over Libya. The PRC prioritised the latter role, showing the 'self-confidence of a successful developing state.'<sup>347</sup> Then, Duggan traces how China's historical self-identification influences its African economic policies. Specifically, he looks at China's involvement in Angola in the early 2000s. While primarily motivated by material interests (Angola is one of the largest oil producers in Sub-Saharan Africa), Beijing carefully framed its economic agreements with Angola as fair deals among equal partners, producing a win-win outcome.<sup>348</sup> Overall, Duggan's most relevant conclusion is that Africa has historically played an important part – the one of significant other – in the PRC's national role conception.

Jörn-Carsten Gottwald and Niall Duggan double down on analysing China's role in Africa. Specifically, by looking at the case study of Sudan, the two scholars aim to demonstrate 'the trajectory and difficulties of "China's role adaptation.'" What emerges is that '[w]ithout giving up on its clear priority for securing access to resources and building up influence, the Chinese leadership has started to implement less confrontational, more proactive policies.'<sup>349</sup> From a historical point of view, Sino-African relations moved from a first phase between the foundation of the PRC and the early reform era characterised by socialist internationalism and anti-colonial solidarity to then reduce its commitment at the end of the 1970s. However, a new surge in China-Africa relations emerged in the mid-2000s.<sup>350</sup> Looking at the works of Chen, Taylor and other scholars, Gottwald and Duggan point out that the 2006 White paper outlined the fundamental principles of China's

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid., pp.216 and 220

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 221

<sup>349</sup> Jörn-Carsten Gottwald and Niall Duggan, *Hesitant adaptation: China's new role*, p. 235

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., p.239

role in Africa. The most relevant one is the respect for state sovereignty, which reflects the demands of local African elites to respect the principle of non-interference in internal affairs by external actors. Notably,

[f]or countries that have found the restructuring programs under the Washington Consensus very harsh, and for governments that have been marginalised by Western criticism of their human rights records, China's position on sovereignty is particularly attractive. Along with the shared experience of colonialism and imperial oppression, China seems to provide an alternative role model providing a new source of political legitimacy for autocratic African polities.<sup>351</sup>

However, it is relevant that the primacy of the non-interference principle has been put in brackets by the PRC's "soft interventions" to protect the interests of Chinese multinational corporations:

In Namibia, the Chinese government pushed for the release of a CEO who had been charged with corruption. In Zambia, the PRC government threatened to pull out its investment if the presidential candidate Michael Sata, who was accused of calling anti-Chinese policies, won the election.<sup>352</sup>

Then, Gottwald and Duggan take a deeper look at the case of Sudan as a case in point of China's role behaviour change prompted by the emergence of, to use Klose's vocabulary, a "problematic situation" – the Darfur crisis. They note that, after initially obstructing the activity of the UN Security Council by diluting the US sanction proposals, the PRC changed its position to the extent of actively participating in the UNSC peacekeeping mission. The shift reflected China's attempt to reconcile external expectations with its own role conception of 'peaceful development. As noted by the authors, China's initial position was coherent with the role of "leading developing country", but the pressure from the Bush administration and some ONGs resulted in the PRC progressively questioning its support for the Sudanese government and the Arab League, supporting the UNSC resolution that strengthened the mission of the African Union in Sudan. According to the authors, the epilogue shows that China moved from an ego-based role

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p.240

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

conception – that of the “leading developing country” – to a more complex and comprehensive role combining its *ego* with *alter* expectations.<sup>353</sup> Ultimately,

[a]s China’s trade and economic interests grow in Africa, its interaction with the continent has become more complex. The international pressure for the PRC to become a more proactive member of the global community, a “responsible stakeholder” in the promotion of global standards and ethics, is now more influential than the pressure to maintain China’s role as an anti-establishment actor.<sup>354</sup>

The study of China’s roles in the Southern Mediterranean region provides essential hints for the definition of Beijing’s role in Sino-Iranian relations. Algeria and Egypt are two of the five countries in the MENA region that enjoy the status of PRC’s comprehensive strategic partners, showing a similar relational pattern to Iran. Furthermore, like the IRI, Algeria and Egypt are ‘two middle powers which play important regional and international roles. Like China, both wish to be independent actors in international relations.’<sup>355</sup> Similarities do not stop there: as in the case of Iran, ‘Algeria, Egypt, and China’s historical selves operate as a significant point of reference for the present self.’ The positive historical legacy and the shared victimhood experience with Western colonialism are all shared features of China’s relationship with these countries.<sup>356</sup> Tran and Zoubir summarise the PRC’s role as follows:

China’s interests and national role conceptions often coincide with those of Algeria and Egypt, as they relate to ‘peaceful development’, ‘reformer of the international system’, ‘anti- hegemonism’, ‘mediator’, and ‘peace contributor’, among others. Of course, such closeness to Algeria and Egypt did not prevent China from establishing a strategic partnership with pro-Western Morocco or excellent relations with Mauritania and Tunisia [...]. A major dimension in role enactment is the necessity for strategic credibility, which includes keeping pledges and fulfilling commitments to partners/allies [...] to justify the roles of South-South collaborator, champion of the developing world, and trusted friend. More importantly, Southern Mediterranean

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., pp.240-242

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p.242

<sup>355</sup> Tran and Zoubir, ‘INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE’ p.7

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

states, like most developing countries, expect China to honour its pledge to represent and defend them in multilateral organisations and in their development.<sup>357</sup>

Finally, looking at China-Egypt relations, Sun Degang and Xu Ruike articulate the idea that the Sino-Egyptian comprehensive strategic partnership is not only based on historical legacies but reflects compatible role conceptions: they perceive each other as rising powers. Yet, according to the authors, '[w]hile China plays a dominant role in bilateral relations, Egypt is in a less advantageous and more vulnerable position. Regardless, China has so far rarely exploited Egypt's weakness and vulnerability for its own benefits, to avoid being depicted as a 'neo-colonialist' in Africa.'<sup>358</sup>

### **China's international roles: primary roles, sub-roles, and audiences**

The role-taking process that the PRC embarked on following the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 coincided with a phase of relevant adjustment of China's international roles. In fact, in the 1970s, the progressive rapprochement with the United States led to the emergence of China's new great power identity. In that context, the PRC's anti-hegemonic role was re-adjusted to target the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, this re-adjustment process continued, pushed by domestic factors and external pressure, culminating in the progressive consolidation of two main international roles: *independent actor* and *responsible great power*. Overall, they capture the broader spectrum of China's international roles, reflecting both the historical continuum of the PRC's national role conceptions and the external expectations of the various *significant others* from the 1970s.

Table 2 presents China's main international roles and the related sub-roles that emerged from the 1970s. While not aiming to be an exhaustive list of all the roles taken by the PRC, the table reflects a personal elaboration derived from the case studies presented in the previous section of the Chapter and the broader study of China's international roles.

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Sun Degang and Xu Ruike, 'China and Egypt's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the Xi-Sisi Era: a 'Role Theory' Prism', *Mediterranean Politics*, p. 17

Table 4.2: PRC's primary international roles, the related sub-roles, and their audiences

<i>Primary roles</i>	(Responsible) great power	Independent actor
<i>Sub-roles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Responsible stakeholder</li> <li>- Peaceful developer</li> <li>- Consolidator of the UN</li> <li>- Leading developing country*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anti-hegemonic leader*</li> <li>- Champion of the Third World*</li> <li>- Defender of developing countries*</li> <li>- Socialist power</li> <li>- All-weather friend</li> </ul>
<i>Primary audience</i>	Great powers / Western world	Developing world

Two critical elements should be derived from the table. First, the chasm between the *responsible great power* and the *independent actor* roles is less apparent than it may seem. In fact, the two roles are intertwined and not necessarily dichotomous, as demonstrated by the associated sub-roles. For instance, *leading developing country* is identified – perhaps counterintuitively – as a sub-role of the *great power* role because it possesses a strong hierarchical element that can only be enacted credibly when performed by an actor with material and ideational capabilities above the average of its peers. Also, locating it in that column captures another critical nuance. To a significant extent, in performing this role, the other great powers are a more relevant audience than the developing countries themselves. Good examples of this dynamic are the already described evolution of China's role in the climate negotiations and the PRC's approach to the Darfur crisis. In both cases, Beijing had to abandon its role as a leading developing country not because the other developing countries no longer accepted it but because the United States and the European Union stopped recognising it. Similarly, the three sub-roles of the *independent actor* role marked with a star on the table encapsulate a leadership dimension naturally associated with material and ideational primacy position. Yet, in those cases, the relevant audience toward which these roles are claimed and performed is that of the developing world. Equally, when the PRC acts as the *anti-hegemonic leader* or as



a defender of developing countries, it should be accepted by significant others directly involved in these roles' performance.

Second, as already sketched, the two main roles correspond to two different relevant audiences. However, the audiences are labelled as primary rather than relevant in the table. Again, this is due to the need to highlight the absence of a clear-cut chasm between the main roles. In fact, while performing a role or a sub-role entails the acceptance of and the interaction with a relevant audience – or specific significant other – it is also evident that different audiences are not simply static bystanders. As in the case of China's role in the relationship with North Korea, the PRC's acting as *socialist power* is primarily watched by Pyongyang and the other socialist countries, but it also attracts the attention of other countries such as South Korea and the United States, which are certainly not the primary audience of that role. The performance of roles and their related audience are not isolated, self-contained phenomena. Therefore, they inevitably generate conflicts.

### **Locating Beijing's role in the partnership with Iran within the PRC's international roles**

Before defining China's *role* in the partnership with Iran, it is necessary to locate it within the broader spectrum of the PRC's international roles described in the previous section of this Chapter. First, the partnership with Iran is not constitutive of a primary role. Reasons are relatively obvious: from the Chinese perspective, the relations with the IRI do not occupy an apical position, making the partnership with Tehran a second-tier relationship for Beijing. Consequently, in an imagined hierarchy of China's international roles, the one taken and enacted in Sino-Iranian relations is subordinated to and contained by one of China's primary roles. Specifically, the *role* can be located as a sub-role of China's *independent actor* primary role. Comparatively, Iran appears naturally positioned within China's relations with the developing world. Thus, the role enacted by Beijing in its relations with Tehran can be broadly assimilated to those enacted vis-à-vis, for instance, the African countries, Vietnam, or North Korea. The sub-roles derived from the independent actor role generally feature comparable ideational cues and demands – although some of them have their particular language associated, for instance, with the shared socialist footprint – and are often built upon what the PRC could offer to its interlocutor as an alternative, radically different power in respect

to the other great powers that have the colonial and hegemonic burden in their hands. China's role in its relations with Tehran naturally belongs to this group. Returning to the two-dimensional interactionist model for the study of bilateral roles presented in Chapter 1, several constitutive elements of the structural and ideational components of the role enacted by the PRC in Sino-Iranian relations confirm this location.

At the ideational level, the anti-hegemonic struggle – a constitutive part of the sub-roles of Beijing's primary role as *independent actor* – is one of the main, if not the primary, definer of the narratives that sustain Sino-Iranian relations. As abundantly described in Chapter 3, the idea of an anti-hegemonic partnership has historically emerged as one of the critical overlaps between the IRI's foreign policy tenets of resisting the influence of the superpowers, namely the United States, and pursuing an independent foreign policy, and the PRC's similar claim to follow an "independent foreign policy of peace." Yet, the ideal convergence of these two highly compatible visions has rarely been translated into an effective anti-hegemonic partnership. China's reluctance to fully embrace and sustain such a critical form of partnership, which for the IRI had its apparent target in the United States, reflects a significant discrepancy between the ideational premises of the *role* and its effective enactment. Nonetheless, the anti-hegemonic component remains a critical lubricant of Sino-Iranian relations, enough to locate China's role in the partnership with the Islamic Republic in the ideational sphere of Beijing's projection as an independent actor. Similarly, other concepts that have a prominent position *on the shelf* of Chinese thinkers and policymakers when interacting with Iran – such as the tenet of mutual non-interference, the conceptualisation of comparable historical traumas, and the very idea of supposed civilisational solidarity – are not exclusive of Sino-Iranian relations. Instead, they can be found with specific declinations in most of the roles enacted by China in its relations with the Global South.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> For instance, the PRC has traditionally focused on framing its relations with African states through a historical lens similar to the use of (mythised) past and historical traumas to build empathy with Iran. On the use of history in China-Africa relations. See, Alden and Alves, 'History and Identity in the Construction of China's Africa Policy', *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.35, No.115 (2008)

Within the structural dimension, China's strategic interests in maintaining and expanding relations with Iran appear to be the main qualifier of Beijing's role in Sino-Iranian relations as a sub-role of China's projection as an independent power. As presented in Chapter 3, in the course of the history of China-Iran relations, Iran has had a non-negligible strategic value for the PRC as a balancer against the superpowers in the Persian Gulf region. If in the 1970s and 1980s, this balancing role was mainly understood and cultivated by Beijing against the Soviet Union, the radical rupture of Tehran-Washington relations in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution reconfigured the strategic opportunity of rebuilding ties with the newly established IRI as a *soft balancer* of the United States in a region whose importance for China's domestic economic development was snowballing. Although carefully played by China, such an intrinsic value of the IRI's self-proclaimed independence suggests, once again, that Iran has its very own place within the PRC's quest for independence. Overall, Iran's location does not only appear to be the obvious consequence of the IRI self-positioning in the broader camp of non-aligned countries. It also might reflect a Chinese understanding that keeping Iran in that camp benefits China, at least to some extent. Thus, the role taken and enacted by Beijing in its partnership with Tehran is consistent with the general tenet of the sub-roles of the PRC's primary role as *independent actor*.

The question of the primary audience of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran is more complex. Being the role a sub-role of the independent actor role, the natural audience is represented by those other countries that share this location. Even more so, a particularly captivated sub-audience might be made of those countries that share with the Islamic Republic a comparable status on international isolation: North Korea, Cuba, and Syria, to name a few. Yet, while those groups and sub-group are the natural audiences of China's role performance in the relations with Iran, they might not be considered the primary ones. In fact, I would argue that the United States and, to a lesser extent, the Western world broadly understood have historically been the primary audiences of this role. As extensively examined in the thesis, Washington is the preeminent *significant other* in China-Iran relations, forming with Tehran and Beijing a triad that profoundly influences the structural and ideational dimension of China's *role*. Consequently, the PRC's enactment of its role in the partnership with Iran inevitably and primarily attracts the US attention, enhancing the probability of the emergence of intra-role conflicts.

**China's role in the relations with Iran: *friendly stakeholder***

Having located China's role in the partnership with Iran, the remaining task is to define it. Instead of borrowing from the typologies specified by Role Theory scholars and presented in Chapter 1 or from the empirical cases described in this Chapter, I valued as more analytically productive to develop a specific label for the PRC's role in the relations with the IRI. The reason is that this role has its very own features, prescriptions, and intrinsic tensions that can only be described through a specific definition. This urgency should not be interpreted as an overstretching of Iran's uniqueness. Instead, it reflects the need for analytical depth that, as lamented in the introduction to this thesis, is often missed in the study of Sino-Iranian relations. I label the international role China has taken and continues to enact in its relations with Iran as the role of *friendly stakeholder*. Such a label is the result of combining the study of the structural (Chapter 2) and ideational (Chapter 3) components of People's Republic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran under the two-dimensional interactionist model suggested in Chapter 1.

### Structural dimension

- (1) Highly asymmetrical great power-middle power partnership
- (2) Secondary/tertiary economic, security, and strategic interests
- (3) Historically affected by one hierarchically superior external variable (China-US rel.) and two hierarchically comparable external variables (Iraq/KSA-China rel.)

### Ideational dimension

- (4) Opposition to hegemony; comparable historical traumas; mythised past; independence and non-interference; friendship and solidarity
- (5) Embedded in China's relations with the developing world and challenged by China's quest for the status of *responsible great power*

*Friendly stakeholder*

FIGURE 4.1: THE STRUCTURAL AND IDEATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE *FRIENDLY STAKEHOLDER* ROLE

What emerges from the intersection of the two dimensions is an international role fundamentally defined by the relative and absolute asymmetry in the power distribution between the PRC and Iran. While concrete interests sit at the constitutive core of the *friendly stakeholder* role, the ideational part appears to be more than just a lubricant: mutual calls for civilisational solidarity, shared historical narratives, and the ever-present flirt with the idea of an anti-hegemonic are as much constitutive of the *role* as interests. The role must be distinguished from the Sino-Iranian partnership, describing what China and Iran make of their cooperation and how they frame it beyond the everyday conduct of bilateral relations. In that sense, the *friendly stakeholder* role is both descriptive, as it attempts to describe and summarise the overarching features and spirit of Sino-Iranian relations, and, to a

certain extent, prescriptive as it presents an interpretative tool to continue observing the evolutionary arch of the PRC-IRI partnership.

The main descriptive features of the *friendly stakeholder* role are the following. The *role* is unquestionably interest-driven, as it reflects that are ‘interests, and not free-floating civilisational solidarities, that primarily motivated Beijing and Tehran to cooperate.’<sup>360</sup> Therefore, material, security, and strategic interests have a threefold impact on the definition of the *role*. First, I argue that, despite an inherent asymmetry, the structural component is characterised by a sufficient degree of compatibility between the *ego* and *alter*’s interests. As presented in Chapter 2, several Chinese material, security, and political interests are consistent with the IRI’s demands. Ultimately, the *role* seems to function as a guarantor of China’s recognition of Iran’s indispensable presence in the region, consequently addressing one of Tehran’s fundamental objectives: the survival of the Islamic Republic. In other words, the PRC’s multifaced material, security, and strategic interests in maintaining and expanding relations with the IRI can be reduced to the minimum overarching interest in Iran’s survival. Such a clear, fundamental shared interest works as a *conditio sine qua non* and lubricant of the *friendly stakeholder* role. Second, despite the underlying compatibility of core interests, the *role* is inevitably defined by Iran’s non-vital place in China’s hierarchy of material, security, and strategic interests. Therefore, the structural component of the *friendly stakeholder* role is inherently sufficient to locate it as a sub-role, as described in the previous section of this Chapter. As a result, the role is secondary and hierarchically subordinated not only to the primary role that contains it (China’s *independent actor* role) but also to the other primary role of *responsible great power*. It is crucial to note that this aspect is a defining feature of the *friendly stakeholder* role, and thus it sets a perimeter for China and Iran’s demands and expectations. Third and salient to the significance of the “stakeholder” part of the role definition, material, security, and strategic interests are at the core of a *role* that is ultimately secondary for China. Consequently, the very idea that interests are what primarily motivates the PRC’s cooperation with the IRI implicitly contains the broader warning that primary interests, which for Beijing are located outside the partnership with Iran and fulfilled by other international roles, are set to prevail over

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<sup>360</sup> Garver, China and Iran, p. 3

secondary ones when a conflict emerges. Such a reality, apparent throughout the history of Sino-Iranian relations, inspired the use of the word *stakeholder* in labelling China's *role* in partnership with Iran. The term not only vehicles the idea that the PRC brings its own material, security, and strategic interests in the definition of the *role*, but it also explicitly references US Deputy Secretary of State Zoellick's infamous call to China to turn into a *responsible stakeholder*.<sup>361</sup>

The centrality of the idea of friendship is not exclusive to China's role in the partnership with Iran. Similar to the *role* of *all-weather friend* of African countries,<sup>362</sup> Beijing tends to frame its relations with Iran under an ideational conceptualisation that surpasses the contingencies to promise a mutual path of development, good relations, and ideational convergence. In the role of *friendly stakeholder*, this aspect is a counterbalance to the unquestionable prominence of concrete interests. Notably, the ideational dimension of the *role* is not only generally more flexible than its structural homologue, as described in Chapter 1. In the specific case of the *friendly stakeholder* role, it also shows a remarkable degree of internal plasticity, which results in the adaptability of specific discourses to different intra-role demands and external pressures. A good example is the anti-hegemonic partnership discourse. The discourse is at the core of the ideational component of China's *role* in the partnership with Iran. It represents one of the IRI's most pressing and historically consistent demands on the PRC, especially targeted at the United States. Yet, Beijing has alternatively decided to advance or reject the framing of the relations with Tehran as an anti-hegemonic partnership in response mainly to external pressures and obligations related to the performance of hierarchically superior roles. Specifically, as presented in Chapter 3, the state of Sino-US relations appears to determine Beijing's acceptance of Tehran's demands to frame the partnership in more explicitly anti-hegemonic and anti-American terms.

The third descriptive feature of the *friendly stakeholder* role is its resilience. Being the products of states' identities and social interactions, international roles

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<sup>361</sup> 'Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility', Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005. [https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration\\_Zoellick\\_remarks\\_notes06\\_winter\\_spring.pdf](https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration_Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf)

<sup>362</sup> Duggan, China's Changing Role in Africa, p. 220

are not static but evolve, are re-adjusted, and could ultimately be abandoned and replaced by different ones. As described in Chapter 5 with the analysis of four historical episodes, China's role in the partnership with Iran went through an initial phase of role-taking that reflected Beijing's need to rebuild the ties with a radically new regime and the IRI's tentative steps to define and stabilise its international posture in the aftermath of the Revolutionary impetus. The second phase, which ideally emerged after the end of the Iraq-Iran War, has seen the PRC enacting the *role* taken in the previous decade. Overall, the span of the PRC-IRI relations covers less than 50 years of history – arguably a not particularly extended timespan. Yet, it has proven to be sufficient to test the resilience of the partnership – as well as that of the *friendly stakeholder* role – significantly, with episodes such as the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from nuclear and missile cooperation with Iran and the 2003 nuclear crisis as potentially disruptive episodes. I argue that the resilience of the *friendly stakeholder* role results from at least four essential factors, two related to the characteristics of the Sino-Iranian partnership and the remaining two more specifically related to the *friendly stakeholder* role.

First, a source of resilience can be traced to the substantial stability of Chinese interests in maintaining good relations with Iran. The discussion in Chapter 2 presented several Chinese economic, security, and strategic interests that have remained consistent through the past four decades of interactions with the IRI. Some of them have been adjusted in scope and saliency, gaining or losing prominence due to changes in the PRC's foreign policy or the impact of external variables.<sup>363</sup> Yet, the overarching Chinese recognition of Iran as a pivotal country in the Persian Gulf, and thus an unavoidable encounter in Beijing's projection toward the region. Second, on the Iranian side of the spectrum, it is once again important stressing the value of China as one of the few major international actors that have maintained consistent relations with Tehran after the 1979 Revolution. Looking at the big picture, the instalment of the Islamic Republic and the 444-day-

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<sup>363</sup> Two opposed examples could be presented here. As suggested in Chapter 2, the oil factor in China's relations with Iran might have loose part of its original significance, moving from being a "driver" in the 1980s and 1990s to progressively turning into an "enabler" in the 2000s due to China's diversification efforts (partly) driven by the effect of international sanctions on the availability and political convenience of Iranian oil. Vice versa, it can be argued that the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative might have opened a potential new phase of Sino-Iranian engagement centred around China's interest in Iran as a potential land hub to connect the mainland with the Middle East and the Mediterranean region without passing through Russia.



long hostage crisis began with the takeover of the US embassy in Tehran by a group of radical students on 4 November 1979, marked the still-unreconciled rupture of US-Iran relations, beginning the IRI's *de facto* international isolation. Although Iran maintained seesawing economic ties with European countries and Eastern powers such as Japan and South Korea, China and Russia have arguably been the only great powers to give Tehran political and economic support in the long-lasting political confrontation with the United States. Iran-Russia relations, however, are loaded with a significantly more troubled history, including the Russian occupation of Tabriz in 1911 and the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran during the World War II, and competing interests.<sup>364</sup> Vice versa, Tehran's partnership with Beijing does not face the burden of a problematic historical heritage. Also, Chinese and Iranian core interests appear more compatible. Therefore, the IRI's relations with China have turned into a top-tier partnership with few, if none, comparable alternatives. Such a condition has forcibly made Sino-Iranian relations significantly resilient, surviving the PRC's occasional underperformances and several Iranian administrations' attempts to re-centre the IRI's foreign and economic relations toward the West (e.g., the Khatami and Rouhani administrations in the late 1990s and 2010s).

The other two sources of role resilience are more strictly related to the features of the *friendly stakeholder* role. I argue that, as explained in detail in the analysis of the historical episodes representative of the role-taken phase, the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath and the Iraq-Iran War (1980-8), in Chapter 5, the genesis of China's role in the relations with the IRI immediately incorporated some of the characteristics that made the *role* resilient, modelling China and Iran's expectations in a way that was not automatically conducive for intra-role conflicts. In other words, the PRC made clear what it could offer Iran from the first phases of the role-taking process. For instance, the PRC gave Tehran only limited diplomatic and political support during the hostage crisis, avoiding explicitly associating itself with the IRI to avoid significant reputational damage. Similarly, the Iraq-Iran War was decisive in instilling in China's *role* the strategic hedging element that still appears a dominant feature of Sino-Iranian relations: Beijing was willing, at least

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<sup>364</sup> On Iran-Russia relations, see Adbolrasool Disvallar, 'The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence', *The International Spectator*, Vol.54, No.3 (2019) 107-122; and Nicole Grajewski, 'An Illusory Entente: The Myth of a Russia-China-Iran "Axis"', *Asian Affairs*, Vol.53, No.1 (2022) 164-183

to a certain extent, to support Iran politically and militarily, but such support would have never been at the expense of Sino-Iraqi ties. Arguably, the opportunity for the PRC to incorporate these crucial elements in its role since its inception resulted from two fundamental dynamics. First, the role-taking process in the relations with the newly established Islamic Republic coincided with China's political and economic transition toward the post-Revolutionary phase – arguably a factor that helped clear the emerging *role* from the potential ambiguities and expectations of a partnership born under the auspices of militant revolutionism. Second, although far less developed and articulated than what it turned out to be in the following decades, in 1979, the PRC already had a sense of its strategic interests in the Persian Gulf (mainly related to countering the Soviet expansionism) and several formalised diplomatic relations with the regional countries (Iraq since the 1950s and Iran since 1971, for instance). The new *role*, therefore, was not built from scratch but incorporated several important tenets that contributed to immediately framing Iran's expectations.

However, even though the very first steps of the role-taking phase should have cleared the IRI on what the PRC could effectively offer, the conduct of Sino-Iranian relations has often and predictably seen Tehran trying to stretch the boundaries of the *friendly stakeholder* role, projecting toward China expectation beyond the scope of the *role*. Equally, as will be apparent from the case study analysis presented in the next Chapter, China has often failed to perform up to the *role's* minimum intrinsic expectations. In both these cases, what has contributed to the resilience of the *role* has been the possibility for Beijing to stretch the ideational component of the role, with its narrative and specific language, to reassure Iran that the underperformances were just occasional and contingent, suggesting that the significance of the partnership went beyond its structural limits.

Regarding the role conflicts associable with the performance of the *friendly stakeholder*, the intra-role ones are intrinsically detectable in the role's name. The ideational component, the Sino-Iranian friendship, is saturated with symbols and powerful narratives – once above all, the idea of the anti-hegemonic alignment between Beijing and Tehran – that it often comes to conflict with the more modest expectations associated with the structural dimension. Although the dichotomy between the structural and ideational dimensions is a source of resilience for the role, given the distinctive plasticity of the latter component, the apparent contrast

between the less ambitious material supply and the often-over-ambitious ideational supply is an eminent source of intra-role conflict. Regarding inter-role conflicts, it is also evident that the primary source is the complex relationship between the *friendly stakeholder* and the *responsible great power* roles. Notably, the latter is strongly associated with China's great power relations with the United States. Secondary sources of inter-role conflicts are the PRC's other relations with Persian Gulf actors and, more broadly, the strategy of building ties with the pivotal regional states regardless of the pre-existing rivalries that Beijing has progressively adopted.

## **Beijing's role-taking and role-enactment in Sino-Iranian relations (1979-2015)**

In Chapter 4, I presented a descriptive definition of the role of *friendly stakeholder* enacted by China in the partnership with Iran based on the intersection between its two fundamental components, the structural and ideational dimensions. As described in Chapter 1, however, this phase of the application of the two-dimensional interactionist model allows defining the static tenets of the role, abstracting it from its everyday practice. Nonetheless, international roles are deeply embedded in the development of, as in the case of Sino-Iranian relations, bilateral relations between actors. The interaction between the conduct of international relations by a given actor and the roles it enacts is constant and mutual. The practice of international relations shapes international roles. The constitutive components of a *role* emerge and evolve through the practice of foreign policy, the cues and demands of the actors involved, the impact of the external intervening variables, and the reaction of the audiences that watch its enactment. Ultimately, the conduct of international relations makes *roles* credible, coherent, and resilient or, in other cases, it questions them to the point of making a specific *role* inconsistent with the conduct of the relations associated with it. In the latter case, the *role* becomes unsustainable, meaningless as it is, opening up two possibilities: an adjustment and redefinition of the role within the broader boundaries of the pre-existing role or its complete abdication, which leads to a radically new phase of role-taking. On the other side, the tenets of a given *role* affect the conduct of international relations, presenting to the subjects involved in the relations – the *ego* and *alter* – a series of essential prescriptions and an overarching map that both use to orient themselves within their mutual relations. In that sense, it is crucial to reiterate that international roles are not synonyms for international relations or foreign policy. The general dynamics of international relations and the conduct of foreign policy by states and other entities are not and cannot be explained solely by the performance of international roles. Instead, the study of roles adds a layer of complexity – or a

different hybrid interpretative key – to understanding global politics beyond the compartmentalisation of structuralist and post-structurally approaches to international relations. With that in mind, the present Chapter explore the interaction between the *friendly stakeholder* role and the practice of Sino-Iranian relations in the timeframe between the 1979 Revolution that installed a new regime in Tehran, the Islamic Republic, and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA), the landmark agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme settled between the IRI and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

### **Chapter outline**

The Chapter presents four historical episodes that, as described in the Introduction of this Thesis, represent critical moments in the history of relations between the PRC and the IRI. Each episode is critically reconstructed by locating it in the broader context of the most relevant Chinese and Iranian domestic and foreign policy trends associable with that specific case study. Consequently, despite being presented and studied as single cases, the historical episodes are intended to represent the historical continuum of Sino-Iranian relations, signalling the need for a holistic approach that locates the role of *friendly stakeholder* in the broader history of Chinese (and Iranian) foreign relations. Figure 5.1 presents a timeline that situates the historical episodes within a critical selection of the most significant global and regional developments, directly and indirectly, involving China and Iran. Given its place as the primary external intervening variable, in each historical episode, particular attention is given to the state of Sino-US relations and its subsequent impact on Beijing's partnership with Tehran. Similarly, a section within each case study is dedicated to describing the role conflicts generated, which are a possible interpretative key to understanding China's policy choices vis-à-vis Iran.

The four historical episodes presented here are divided into two continuous phases. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1980-8 Iraq-Iran War are constitutive of the role-taking phase, representing the foundational moments of China's relations and *role* with the newly established Islamic Republic. The 1996-7 disengagement and the 2003-15 nuclear negotiations reflect the role-enactment phase. Yet, it is crucial to clarify that this division is not trenchant. International

roles are not static: they face a continuous evolution that reflects the input given by the everyday conduct of international relations.

### **The role-taking phase: The 1979 Revolution and the Iraq-Iran War**

The first two historical episodes presented in this Chapter constitute the role-taking phase of China's *friendly stakeholder* role in Sino-Iranian relations. These are two macro-episodes selected because of their salience in the context of Sino-Iranian relations. They do not aim to provide a detailed social, political, military, and foreign policy history of the first decade of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 1979 Revolution and the Iraq-Iran War (1980-8) represent two critical developments in the definition of the new subject that substituted the regime in Iran embodied by the reign of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. As evident, the 1979 Revolution is the generative moment that led to the definition and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iraq-Iran War, because of its traumatic impact on the fragile post-Revolution state, its symbolism, and its regional and global implication, represent a crucial episode in the consolidation path of the new regime. Representing the emergence, establishment, and ultimate consolidation of a new actor, the 1979 Revolution and the Iraq-Iran War are naturally associated with the role-taking phase: the PRC had to take a new *role* that reflected the emerging cues and demands of the IRI, which, in turn, was still emerging and defining itself. Therefore, the encounter between the People's Republic and the Islamic Republic was particularly lively. So, it was the role-taking phase that allowed China to incorporate into the new *role* the fundamental tenets and some of the conflictual dynamics that remain visible four and a half-decade after the 1979 Revolution. As a final introductory note, there is a temporal overlap between the two episodes, which is intended to reinforce the idea that historical episodes

### **The 1979 Iranian Revolution and its aftermath**

The 1979 Revolution in Iran represents one of the most defining moments of the modern Middle East. The Revolutionary Vanguard, guided by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, toppled the secular, Westernised, monarchic regime of Mohammad Reza Shah and installed a theocratic Islamic republic. But also prompted a profound reconfiguration of the security landscape of the Persian Gulf, forcing the United States to radically change its regional policy, which until 1979

had in the Washington-aligned Iran one of the pillars of the Persian Gulf security architecture. The 1979 Revolution was also an extremely complex phenomenon whose ultimate result, the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was the product of a multi-faced, politically diverse revolutionary movement within which the Khomeinist faction finally prevailed over its other components – the Marxist Tudeh Party and the Freedom Movement among others. Yet, perhaps most importantly, the Iranian revolution was animated by an internationalist zest, on one side manifested in the form of projecting the IRI as the forefront of the global Islamic solidarity and, even more ambitiously, as the leader of a nation oppressed by the superpowers.<sup>365</sup> On the other, the Revolution was fuelled by the decisive rejection of the Shah's alignment with the United States as part of a broader ambition of disfranchising the newly-born Islamic Republic of Iran from the bipolar architecture of the Cold War. “Neither West nor East,” one of the slogans of the Revolution that Khomeini turned into a foreign policy pillar of the IRI, embodied Revolutionary Iran’s refusal to align either with the United States or the USSR. Therefore, the most consequential question is: Was China part of the East? Indeed, Iran’s quest for independence was deeply embedded in the bipolarism of superpower politics. China was not a superpower itself, let alone that it was also at odds with the Soviet Union. Yet, as Garver notes, ‘during the first several years after the IRI was established, the CCP’s Communist philosophy, combined with ignorance of China by Iran’s new leaders, qualified China for inclusion in the “East”.’<sup>366</sup> Remarkably, the birth of the IRI coincided with a topical moment for the Chinese foreign policy.

In 1978, while the Revolution was brewing in Iran, China underwent a historical change in its foreign policy and development path. Deng Xiaoping, who was sworn paramount leader by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in December 1978, abandoned Mao’s revolutionary foreign policy to embrace the idea that, for China, economic prosperity, technological advancement, and power could only be achieved through opening up to the world. The de-revolutionization of the PRC’s domestic politics was accompanied by a similar process involving China’s foreign policy, which became post-revolutionary. In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter

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<sup>365</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, p. 26

<sup>366</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 59

granted the PRC full diplomatic recognition,<sup>367</sup> completing the long rapprochement between Washington and Beijing that began with his predecessor, Richard Nixon, in 1971, based on the geopolitical principle of containing the USSR and the more idealistic objective of deepening bilateral ties with China as an opportunity that could benefit global governance. Yet, the Reagan administration, which succeeded Carter in 1981, took a less idealistic approach toward China, ‘inject[ing] a greater degree of realism into it, based on China's actual capabilities, and the limitations imposed by working with a non-democratic state.’<sup>368</sup> The PRC did not remain passive. In 1982, Reagan’s build-up of US military capabilities, arms sales to Taiwan, and signs of a less confrontational Soviet policy pushed the Chinese leadership to re-adjust the People’s Republic foreign policy to a newly, more independent stance. According to this new vision, the United States and the USSR were both considered hegemonic superpowers. Rather than seeking alignment with one of them, China had to find its place in the international system – certainly a less militant, more mature one but still opposed to hegemonism and external interference, while sympathetic with those countries trying to remain nonaligned with the superpowers. Ultimately, China’s “independent foreign policy” marked a decisive step that clarified that Beijing was still building a working relationship with the United States without sitting in Washington’s camp and helped the Chinese authorities complete the rapprochement with the IRI.

As anticipated, the reconstruction of Sino-Iranian relations in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution was not straightforward for the PRC. Beijing suffered the mistrust of the Khomeinist leadership, facing both the hubris of the Revolutionary idea of independence and militant internalist Islamism and the burden of the relationship with the Shah. China had established formal diplomatic relations with Tehran in 1971 on the premise that Iran was not just the most important regional power in the Persian Gulf but that the alliance between the Shah and the United States was functional to Beijing’s geopolitical objective of containing the USSR.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America (December 16, 1978), Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceus//eng/zmgx/doc/ctc/t36256.htm>

<sup>368</sup> Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China since 1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 230

<sup>369</sup> John W. Garver, *China’s Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 337



Also, the 1978 Hua Guofeng's visit to Tehran, in which the paramount leader and the Shah 'had got on well together and had been in agreement on several vital issues,'<sup>370</sup> was a scar for which the Chinese authorities had to apologise for as part of their rapprochement with the IRI. Equally, the fact that Sino-US relations were reaching one of their historical apogees precisely at the same time as the Iranian revolutionaries were fighting to topple a regime accused of being a puppet in Washington's hands did not help make the Chinese case among the Khomeinist revolutionaries. Yet, the Iranian revolutionary leadership began educating itself about China quite quickly, discovering that the Eastern giant was not only one of the few major powers sympathetic to Iran's revolutionary struggle and prone to establish relations with the IRI, but it also shared certain civilisational beliefs and traumas that could give ideational depth to what otherwise would have been strictly interest-based relations.

If the initial Iranian mistrust appeared more ideological than practical, China was caught in a paradox. Deng Xiaoping had just made clear that the PRC was abandoning the revolutionary foreign policy of the Mao era. Countries like the IRI, whose revolutionary momentum was very much ongoing, and the anti-Americanism was fervent, were not the partners that China was looking forward to associating itself with. As Garver eloquently puts it, 'the IRI's revolutionary approach to world affairs was exactly what China was trying to shed under Deng Xiaoping.'<sup>371</sup> Nonetheless, the very same overarching interests that motivated Beijing's relations with the Shah remained after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Iran was, without any doubt, a regional powerhouse, and the Soviet expansionism of the 1970s was still rampant – the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 – and alarming for the PRC. In other words, China had to balance an apparent interest in continuing the cooperation with Iran with the need not to jeopardise its relations with the United States and, more broadly, Deng's new vision for the PRC's development.

On November 4, 1979, a group of radical revolutionary students entered the US embassy in Tehran, beginning a seizure that lasted 444 days. The event was

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<sup>370</sup> William Branigin, 'Unrest, Soviet Shadow Upstaged Hua in Iran', *The Washington Post*, 2 September 1978, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1978/09/02/unrest-soviet-shadow-upstaged-hua-in-iran/40bfd5a0-7dc4-4a0f-98d1-b25c1a1d376a/>

<sup>371</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p. 61

cataclysmic for the course of US-IRI relations, prompting the Carter administration to impose the first sanction regime against Tehran. China's official reaction to the seizure reflected a pattern – attempting to balance the support for Iran and the need to stress the importance of respecting international norms – that became apparent in the following years. The official statement of the Chinese MFA claimed that the PRC defended the right of every country to manage its own affairs without foreign interference. Still, ‘the principles guiding international relations and the accepted diplomatic immunities should be universally respected.’<sup>372</sup> Similarly, the Carter administration's response to the seizure was the occasion for the PRC to establish another pillar of its support for Tehran: Beijing publicly opposed the imposition of US-sponsored economic sanctions on Iran as a solution to push Tehran to the negotiation table. Garver reported the words of the Vice Foreign Minister Song Zhiguang: ‘the hasty American move [the imposition of economic sanctions on the IRI in response to the Embassy seizure] endangered sympathy that had emerged for the plight of the American hostages.’<sup>373</sup> Song's words show that China was careful at gauging the international sentiment regarding the Embassy seizure, as much as it was aware that unequivocally associating itself with the IRI would have critically damaged its credibility. Blaming the United States for the use of the economic weapon – picturing it as a unilateral violation of Iran's sovereignty, a principle that Beijing found consistent with the international norms – shielded the PRC behind a median position that was functional to gain credibility in Tehran and not losing much of it with the Western world.

All along 1980, China intensified the diplomatic rapprochement with the Islamic Republic through a series of visits and diplomatic ceremonies, including the celebrations of the first anniversary of the establishment of the Islamic Republic held by the Chinese embassy in Tehran in February. The complete diplomatic rapprochement then happened in 1982. Once again, the striking overlap between the unfolding of Sino-US and Sino-Iranian relations suggests the intimate connection between the two. The launch of the PRC's new “independent foreign policy” was welcomed in Tehran. In fact, China's decision not to pursue a closer alignment with the United States emerged while Washington was building up its

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p.65

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., p.66

military presence in the Persian Gulf, and the IRI tasted the sour savour of international isolation amid the Iraq-Iran War. In January 1980, President Carter launched the new US strategy to contain the Soviet Union, later known as the Carter doctrine.<sup>374</sup> The doctrine was essentially focused on expanding the US military presence in the Persian Gulf to protect the oil routes in response to (1) the perceived threat of the USSR expansionism in the Middle East following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and (2) the collapse of Iran as the security guarantor of the Persian Gulf on behalf of the United States. The Iranians could not accept Washington's military build-up in the Persian Gulf, and neither, in principle, could China. In 1973, Chinese Foreign Minister Jin Pengfei publicly argued that Persian Gulf states should manage the region's security without external interference. What a decade before was an apparent reference to Soviet expansionism in the 1980s was naturally applicable to the US military build-up. While I would go as far as Garver does in suggesting a possible link between the Sino-Iranian rapprochement of the early 1980s and the launch of the PRC's "independent foreign policy", with the former being one of the factors that inspired the latter,<sup>375</sup> it seems plausible that without the China signalling the will of remaining outside the US orbit any rapprochement with the IRI would have been significantly more difficult. Finally, in 1982, the Islamic Republic sent its ambassador to take his post in Beijing. Between 1983 and 1984, the foreign ministers of the PRC and the IRI paid their first reciprocal visits. The theme of these historical meetings was the existence of common ground between the two, essentially encapsulated in both being "neither West, nor East" and independent. Less than five years after the 1979 Revolution and the initial Iranian mistrust, the antihegemonic spirit of Sino-Iranian relations was already in full swing.

### *Beijing lays the foundation of its role in China-Iran relations*

With the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, China found itself in the position of redefining its relations with Tehran. To an extent, the fact that the new subject – the IRI – was the product of a Revolution

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<sup>374</sup> Address by President Carter on the State of the Union before a Joint Session of Congress, 23 January 1980, US Department of State, Office of the Historian,

<https://History.State.Gov/Historicaldocuments/Frus1977-80v01/D138>

<sup>375</sup> Garver, China and Iran, p. 75

that radically changed Iran's domestic and foreign policy helped China lay the foundation of its *role* on a quasi-blank base. Rebuilding relations with the PRC was certainly not a top priority of the IRI's leadership amid the revolutionary chaos of the early 1980s. Nor it was, especially if seen in the broader context of its foreign policy in flux, for Beijing to secure a partnership with the new regime in Tehran. Yet, although the emergence of the IRI forced China to the difficult task of rebuilding its *role* from scratch, the first phase of the engagement shows that Beijing was already equipped with several ideational and material components that characterise the *responsible stakeholder* role. On one side, the explicit recognition of Iran as a pivotal country in the Persian Gulf was already a tenet of Sino-Iranian relations before the 1979 Revolution. On that base, China could reinforce the idea that Iran's independence remained a valuable tool to balance Soviet expansionism and, especially after 1982, the US military build-up in the Persian Gulf. This view fitted well with the IRI revolutionary slogan of "neither West nor East", which, once deprived of its most idealistic components, looked like a very practical – and perhaps not very original – call to a third way in opposition to the hegemonic dynamics of the superpowers' politics of the Cold War. China's anti-hegemonic discourse, historically rooted in the Five principles of peaceful coexistence, was there to serve that purpose even more credibly after 1982.

### ***A role born out of conflicts***

The main feature of China's initial role-taking phase in the relations with the IRI is the peculiar conditions under which Beijing had to rebuild its relations with Tehran after the 1979 Revolution. The PRC was entering a new phase of its domestic and foreign policy, abandoning the revolutionary ambitions that characterised the Mao era. Arguably, such an epochal change – even more so considering the intrinsic revolutionary nature of the PRC, which was born, as much as the IRI, from a Revolution – did not happen overnight, nor was its foreign policy component resolved with the completion of the rapprochement with the United States in 1979. As previously described, the launch of the "independent foreign policy of peace" in 1982 was the very testament that the PRC was in flux, tentatively re-adjusting itself. Consequentially, China's international roles were facing the same adjustments, abandoning their most militant components in favour of new concepts that reflected Deng's focus on economic development. Anti-hegemonism remained a significant

component of the PRC's international roles after Mao. Therefore, rather than framing it as militant support for revolutionary struggles in the Third World, it was primarily redefined as political support to the developing world at the UN, economic cooperation, and ideational empathy and material support with those countries that suffered the yoke of the superpowers. Despite the 1982 re-adjustment, the United States was the indispensable partner of a modernising China that sought to develop its domestic economy and ultimately become a post-revolutionary great power. In that context, Beijing's role as *responsible stakeholder* in Sino-Iranian relations began to emerge, immediately shaped by several intrinsic conflicts.

First, a potential intra-role conflict was immediately apparent and defined by the contrasting ideological inspiration of the two regimes or, as Garver magisterially describes it, the 'chasm between the atheistic materialist creed of the CCP and the fervent Islamic faith of the men who founded and led the IRI.'<sup>376</sup> Notably, such a conflict was not only ideal but, potentially, very much practical. The revolutionary, internationalist Islamism of the IRI was a potential menace to the PRC's growing security paranoia for the secessionist winds of the Muslim communities of China's Western provinces. This concern brought the Chinese to express a 'clear preference for secular leaders like President Beni-Sadr over Ayatollah Khomeini.'<sup>377</sup> Linked to this initial mistrust, the complex and ultimately tragic relationship between the Khomeinists and the Marxist and Communist revolutionary factions, which had cultivated important links with Chinese Maoist in the pre-revolutionary period, might have added a further layer of suspicion toward China among the Islamic revolutionary elite that had progressively consolidated its power in Iran at the expenses of the other revolutionary forces, including the abovementioned Marxist groups.<sup>378</sup> The Chinese response to this conflict, which successfully underplayed it, was essentially based on several elements: (1) a generally cautious and somehow neutral approach to the Iranian Revolution and its radical aftermath; (2) the limited influence of the IRI's militant Shi'ism on the predominantly-Sunni groups in the Western provinces of China, (3) the almost immediate warning by Chinese authorities that any Iranian attempt to

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., p.59

<sup>377</sup> William Figueroa, 'China and the Iranian Revolution: New Perspectives on Sino-Iranian Relations, 1965–1979', *Asian Affairs*, Vol.53, No.1 (2022), p. 119

<sup>378</sup> See Ibid.

project influence in Xinjiang would have impeded Sino-Iranian cooperation in other areas;<sup>379</sup> (4) the reference to civilisational commonalities rather than ideological differences; (5) the opportunity given by the reconfiguration of Chinese foreign policy from Mao's militant revolutionism to the soberer, arguably less ideologically characterised "independent foreign policy" promoted by Deng Xiaoping. The result was that, despite the initial mistrust and the conflictual ideological environment, the PRC completed the diplomatic rapprochement with the IRI in 1982.

The second foundational conflict was an inter-role one. Although Deng's China was still amid one of the most substantial evolutions of its domestic and foreign policy at the time of the Islamic Revolution, the contrast with the IRI's radical and militant revolutionary projection was immediately apparent. The ideal intertwinement between China's cautious reaction to the 1979-80 hostage crisis and the conceptualisation of the "independent foreign policy" in 1982 exemplifies a conflict that later became one of the most defining features of the *responsible stakeholder* role. The median position adopted by the Chinese in response to the hostage crisis – criticising Iran in the name of the respect for the diplomatic etiquette and the guiding principles of international relations while blaming the United States for the choice of using the economic weapon and not trying to build up a diplomatic solution to the crisis – set the tone for the management of future crises that, because they had Iran's malign behaviour at their core, would attract the attention of an audience – formed by the United States and the West in general – that was pushing for China to accept the responsibilities of a leading member of the international community. Contextually, the turn of events that brought Deng Xiaoping to distance the PRC from the United States and stressing the idea of Beijing as an independent great power counterposed – yet not unwilling to talk and cooperate with Moscow and Washington – was indeed a primary factor that lubricated the Chinese effort to finalise the rapprochement with the new regime in Tehran. It is improbable that the Iran question played a crucial role in the Chinese calculation to adopt the new foreign policy in 1982. Yet, it is apparent that the rebuild of Sino-Iran relations was inevitably linked to Beijing's relations with Washington, therefore implicitly containing the conflictual element that overwhelmingly emerged in the 1996-7 disengagement.

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<sup>379</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.133

### **The Iraq-Iran War (1980-8)**

The eight-year-long War with Iraq represents one of the most defining moments in the history, evolution, and consolidation of the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran. Domestically, the *Imposed War*, as it became addressed in Tehran, provided the regime with the occasion to rally the population around the flag of the Islamic revolution while completing, once and for all, the consolidation of the Islamic Republic over the challenge posed by the multi-colour factions that took part to the 1978-9 Revolutionary impetus.<sup>380</sup> Equally, the political centrality of the Iranian armed forces, particularly that of the IRGC, the most radical of them and the one charged with the holy role of guardianship of the Islamic Revolution, grew thanks to the War significantly. Internationally, the first phase of the War presented Iran with the striking reality of the IRI's regional and global isolation. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf openly sided with and financed Saddam's War, and the United States offered quite yet decisive intelligence to Iraq. Following the Iraqi invasion on September 22, 1980, even the reaction of the United Nations was mild and showed little sympathy for Iran:

Not only the [Security] Council taken nearly five days to react to a clear violation of the [UN] Charter, but when it did so, it reacted weakly, calling in the belligerents to cease fire but not withdraw immediately to the internationally recognised borders.<sup>381</sup>

Notably, the prolonging of the War presented some complex, perhaps unexpected dynamics, such as the infamous Iran-Contra affairs, which brought together an extraordinarily articulated web of illicit arms sales and funds that involved Iran, Israel, the United States, and the Contra rebels in Nicaragua:

Put as simply as possible, the deal was for Israel to supply Iran with much-needed weapons and weapon spares, for Israel to be paid by Iran and be resupplied by the US,

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<sup>380</sup> On the consolidation of the Khomeinist state and the purge of the secular factions in the first decade after the 1979 Revolution, see Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran. A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 186-267; Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 169-182

<sup>381</sup> Charles Tripp, 'The Security Council and the Iran-Iraq War' in Vaughan Lowe, Adam Roberts, Jennifer Welsh and Zaum Dominik, (eds.), *The United Nations Security Council and War: The Evolution of Thought and Practice since 1945* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 370

for Israel to feed the proceeds of the sales to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua (the US Congress had forbidden the Reagan administration to fund the Contras directly) and for Iran to use its influence to bring about the release of American hostages being held by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon.<sup>382</sup>

The public exposition of the Iran-Contra affair in 1986, which the Reagan administration organised to get around the Congressional ban against funding the Contra, was perceived in the White House as potentially destructive damage to the presidency, the second one involving Iran after the hostage crisis under the Carter presidency. According to Axworthy, the Reagan administration shielded itself from the damage of the public exposition of the Iran-Contra affair by ‘turn[ing] much more firmly against Iran in the Iraq-Iran War.’<sup>383</sup>

The War lasted for eight years, destroying Iran’s economy, causing an extraordinary humanitarian, physical, and psychological trauma among the Iranian, and arguably significantly shaping the defence and security strategies of the IRI, fostering the radical responses to the isolation paranoia that still feature Iran’s regional and global projection. Consequently, the Iraq-Iran War inevitably represented a critical juncture in the nascent PRC-IRI relations. As described in the previous historical episode, Beijing and Tehran resumed diplomatic ties in 1982, two years into the War. In the following years, the narrative of the anti-hegemonic partnership became one of the defining *topoi* of China’s emerging role in the partnership with Iran. Therefore, the PRC’s indirect yet complex involvement in the Iraq-Iran War represents a foundational passage for the definition of the *responsible stakeholder* role, stratifying some of its fundamental tenets and role conflicts.

Iraq was one of the first Arab states to establish full diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic in 1958, more than a decade before Iran (1971). Albeit not always idyllic, Sino-Iraqi relations proceeded smoothly, especially if compared with the backlash faced by the Beijing-Tehran axis in the passage between the Shah’s regime and the Islamic Republic.<sup>384</sup> Yet, given that at the time of the Iraqi

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<sup>382</sup> Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, p.252

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, p.255

<sup>384</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, ‘Decisionmaking in Triplicate: China and the Three Iraqi Wars’, in Andrew Scobell, Larry M. Wortzel, *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking Under Stress*, Institute for Strategic Studies, (2005), p. 193



invasion, China was courting the IRI to resolve the reputational damage caused by Foreign Minister Hua's visit to Tehran in 1978 and re-establish the ties with a country that was perceived as key in the regional balance of power against the Soviet Union, the PRC had no strategic, material, or ideological reasons to decide to side with one of the belligerents. Consequently, Beijing chose to shield itself behind an official 'neutrality combined with professions of friendship and continued commerce with both belligerents.'<sup>385</sup> The official Chinese position presented by Premier Zhao Ziyang in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi invasion not only outlined the basic Chinese understanding of the conflict but also remarkably set the general tone of the PRC's standard response to regional conflicts in the Persian Gulf. In Garver's summary, the three guiding principles established by Zhao are the following: '(1) the conflict was not in the interests of either Iran or Iraq, and disputes between the two should be settled peacefully via negotiations; (2) the superpowers should not intervene in the conflict; and (3) the fighting should not expand, lest it threatens peace and stability in the Gulf area.'<sup>386</sup>

On those premises, China voted in favour of the September 28, 1980, Security Council resolution that urged both belligerents to settle their dispute peacefully. The Islamic Republic did not welcome the resolution. Khomeini was outraged by the UN's refusal to acknowledge that the two belligerents were not at the same moral level since Iran was defending itself from the unlawful Iraqi invasion. The same outrage toward the UN resolution was directed to China's vote in favour of the resolution. Notably, in 1980, Sino-Iranian relations were still far from recovery, and Beijing was at the zenith of its rapprochement with the United States. One could reasonably argue that, during the conflict, the PRC could have taken a more prominent diplomatic stance, actively mediating between the two opponents based on its good relations with Iraq and Iran – largely a unicum in the post-1979 political landscape. According to Yitzhak Shichor, China refrained from any active mediation role for two reasons. On one side, that would have most probably meant abandoning neutrality and taking the side of one of the belligerents, something that China has usually avoided, especially in conflicts erupting in regions of secondary importance. On the other, Beijing was a relative newcomer to the

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<sup>385</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.69

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

Security Council, and it is reasonable to believe that it was still more comfortable playing the outsider role instead of assuming a leadership position.<sup>387</sup> Yet, as noted by Garver, China's diplomacy at the United Nations during the unfolding conflict was balanced between the broader alignment with the other permanent member of the Security Council, a behaviour consistent with the overarching objective of being recognised as a responsible great power that was emerging in the Chinese thinking of the 1980s, and the support for and public show of solidarity with Iran.<sup>388</sup> Beijing voted in favour of the June 1984 UNSC Resolution 552, calling the belligerents to cease attacks on commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf. During the draft of the UNSC Resolution 598 in 1987, the one that was effectively adopted as the final call to Iraq and Iran to cease fire and negotiate a peaceful solution to the War, the Chinese and Iranian representatives at the UN worked together to water down the first drafts of the resolution in terms more acceptable for the IRI – an help that China was willing to give Iran without the quid pro quo offered by the Soviets that asked Iran to stop criticising the USSR's policy in Afghanistan.<sup>389</sup> However, for nearly a year, Iran refused to accept Resolution 598, significantly increasing the risk of an open confrontation between the Islamic Republic and the United States, whose Navy began escorting the vessels of non-belligerent countries transiting through the war zones of the Persian Gulf. Notably, in mid-1987, China was the only permanent member of the Security Council that did not deploy warships in the Persian Gulf, refusing to participate in the collective operation to secure the safe passage of commercial ships in the area. Chinese refrain from being directly involved in the security of the Persian Gulf was particularly notable both because it signalled the PRC's reluctance to deploy military assets and personnel in a conflict zone where Beijing was not openly involved and because it sent a positive political message to the IRI, once again stating that it was not keen to join any military initiative targeted to Iran.<sup>390</sup> Nonetheless, the PRC's continuous arms sales to Iran (and Iraq) had already implicitly involved it in the War. In 1987, the sales of Chinese-made Silkworm missiles, a formidable anti-ship weapon, to Iran backfired, putting the PRC in a challenging position.

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<sup>387</sup> Shichor, 'Decisionmaking in Triplicate', pp. 194-5

<sup>388</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.82

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89

Arms sales to the IRI undoubtedly represented the most crucial factor in the success of China's role-taking during the Iraq-Iran War. As Garver notes,

Beijing's willingness to meet Iran's needs for munitions during its desperate struggle against Iraq, and its resistance to US demands to end those sales, earned considerable goodwill in Tehran. It demonstrated in a very practical way that China was independent of the United States and could and would resist US pressure.<sup>391</sup>

The supply of Chinese arms, munitions, and military equipment to Iran continued all along the eight years of the War. Several major deals were negotiated from 1983, establishing the practice of using intermediary countries, such as North Korea, to hide the deliveries and advancing its strategy of plausible deniability, while allowing Iran to honour the contracts in oil-for-arms payments. China was also willing to allow Iran to produce Chinese military equipment domestically.<sup>392</sup> During the War, China became Iran's largest arms supplier, quantitatively and qualitatively rivalled only by Pakistan and possibly North Korea. Chinese supplies included tanks, armoured vehicles, fighter aeroplanes, small ships, and various types of missiles, including ballistic, surface-to-air, anti-ship, anti-tank, air-to-air, and cruise missiles. Beyond these sales, China was particularly active in helping Iran advance its own domestic military industry through technical cooperation, technology and expertise transfers, and the sale of dual-use technology.<sup>393</sup> To a certain extent, in the logic of self-reliance that permeates the IRI's defence and security policy, the Chinese help assumes an even broader significance. The PRC was not just able to meet the Iranian demands during the War, but it also established a pattern of cooperation that fit with the IRI's intimate understanding of its weaknesses and subsequent strategic response based on developing a self-sufficient domestic military industry.

Perhaps the most controversial, tactically important, and politically problematic Chinese weapons supply to Iran in the post-1985 phase of the Iraq-Iran War was that of the HY-2 anti-ship missiles. Better known as "Silkworm", the HY-

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<sup>391</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.80

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-1

<sup>393</sup> For a comprehensive review of China's arms sales to Iran during the Iraq-Iran War, see, Bates Gill, 'Chinese Arms Exports to Iran', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.2, No.2 (1998); Garver, *China and Iran*, pp.166-200

2 gave Iran decisive attack capabilities in the so-called “tanker war”, a new phase of the broader Iraq-Iran conflict in which the two belligerents became attacking commercial vessels sailing in the Persian Gulf. As the conflict turned toward a potential Iranian victory, the United States more visibly aligned with Iraq, escalating the risk of an Iran-US confrontation in the Persian Gulf. Things plummeted in October 1987 when the US Navy captured an Iranian military vessel, and the IRI retaliated by firing HY-2 missiles toward US vessels, hitting a US-flagged oil tanker. At that point, the Chinese had constantly denied selling Silkworm missiles to Iran. Yet, on October 22, the Reagan administration retaliated directly against China in an unprecedented way: Washington froze the liberalisation of technology sales to the PRC, acting ‘for the first time against a third country for supplying weapons to Iran.’<sup>394</sup> Under Chinese pressure, the Iranian stopped firing HY-2, and in March 1988 Beijing reassured the State Department that it would stop selling anti-ship missiles to the Islamic Republic. Consequently, the Reagan administration relaxed the punitive commercial measures imposed on China six months before.<sup>395</sup> Although Tehran and Beijing continued their missiles cooperation after 1988, with the PRC selling other types of weapons and, even more importantly, helping Iran to produce the HY-2 indigenously, the entanglement of events related to the Silkworm missiles in 1987-8 is crucial to understand the intimated link between Iran, China, and the United States. As will be apparent in the study of the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from critical cooperation with the IRI, the “Iran card” is a crucial bargaining chip that Washington and Beijing have used to relax their relations during exceptionally high tensions.

Ultimately, the Chinese help during the Iraq-Iran War was very practical – and arguably helped Iran resist and advance against the powerful Iraqi army – but also highly symbolic. Saddam Hussein was able to secure arms sales and military and intelligence support from the USSR, France, the United States, most of the Arab countries, and China itself, among the others. Vice versa, the IRI was isolated, and the Chinese commitment assumed a probably disproportioned symbolism: the predominantly commercial logic behind the sales and even the fact that China was supplying Iran’s belligerent paled in front of the exceptionalism of the PRC’s help.

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<sup>394</sup> Bates Gill, *Chinese Arms Exports*, p.58

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59

In supplying arms to Iran at a crucial time, China demonstrated Iran to be a *friend* – one with its own interests, for sure – in peril.

***The consolidation of China's role: Arms sales and defiance of international isolation***

The crucial importance of the Iraq-Iran War in the role-taking phase of China's *friendly stakeholder* role in the relations with Iran is threefold. Beyond their strategic and military importance to Iran, Beijing's arms sales had a significant symbolic value. Differently from the other great powers, which directly or indirectly, yet substantially, isolated the IRI, the PRC was the only prominent international actor consistently offering Tehran what was avidly and most concretely looking for: military support. Undoubtedly, such support significantly helped China concretise the narrative of friendship and anti-hegemonic alignment around which it tried to re-centre the spirit of the Sino-Iranian relations after the 1979 Revolution. The anti-hegemonic discourse with Iran was consistent with the PRC's broader discourse around the Iraq-Iran War, which implied that the hegemonic behaviour of the superpowers was fuelling it. The PRC refused to abide by Washington's Operation Staunch, which, with the so-called *tanker war* ready to emerge as a further disruptive spill-over of the Iraq-Iran War, launched in 1983, aimed at blocking the international sales of weapons to Iran, signalling Iran its commitment to cement the partnership.<sup>396</sup> On a side note, the way in which China conducted arms sales to Iran during the War, often using intermediary countries such as Syria and Pakistan, might have unintendedly reflected one of the idealistic objectives of the revolutionary foreign policy of the Islamic Republic: the creation of a network of anti-hegemonic countries, helping each other with the shared and ultimate goal of contrasting the hegemonic attempts of the United States and, more broadly, the West. Indeed, this was unspoken and not a concrete reason behind the use of intermediary countries. Still, this might have resonated during a war in which several regional and global countries took more or less direct anti-Iranian stances. What is unquestionable, though, is that Chinese arms sales to Iran during the Iraq-Iran War helped China crystallise the *friendly* component of its emerging role,

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<sup>396</sup> It is worth noting that the Iran-Contra affair, through which the United States facilitated the sale of weapons to Iran between 1981 and 1986, was in overt contrast with the objectives of Operation Staunch.

gaining credibility and trust in Iran despite the apparent inter-role conflict of supplying both belligerents in the War.

Second, in the aftermath of the conflict, China approached Iran, offering help in a critical time for the reconstruction of a country that exited the War in economic peril and international isolation. In 1991, President Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani awarded a Chinese company, the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), the contract to build the Tehran metro system, a flagship project symbolising the ascent of the PRC in the Iranian infrastructural market. Therefore, the Iraq-Iran War did not only present China with the convenient opportunity of emerging as a War-time *friend* of Iran but also as a working partner in peace-time. Again, this emergence of Beijing as a partner of the Islamic Republic was particularly relevant and apparent compared to Tehran's international isolation.

Lastly, the *Imposed War* defined the boundaries of China's political support for Iran in the international fora. Similarly to the Chinese reaction to the hostage crisis in 1979-80, Beijing's approach to the Iraq-Iran War showed the Iranians that any support at the UN would hardly be explicit or against the tenet of a mediated solution under the spirit of the UN chart. In other words, if the Iranian hoped to find in Beijing a partner willing to take a more robust supportive stance at the UN, and even more so at the Security Council, in the name of the shared anti-hegemonic worldview, then they would be disappointed. During the Iraq-Iran War, China proved to be a rather conservative member of the Security Council, acting with prudence and mainly as a follower of the dominant mood within the Council. As will emerge during the nuclear negotiations (2003-2015), China's support for Iran at the UN is never disruptive. Instead, it is modelled to mediate between its two primary *roles* – the responsible great power and the independent actor.

***The emerging conflicts between China's regional stance, its international responsibilities, and the role in its relations with Iran***

China's approach to the Iraq-Iran War could be summarised in two discrete-yet-interconnected positions. On the international stages, such as the United Nations, China enacted what Garver defines as pro-Iranian neutrality.<sup>397</sup> The position was conveniently designed to mediate the need to cultivate the partnership with Iran,

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<sup>397</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.89

abiding by the tenets of non-interference and respect for the role of United Nations, thus showing a responsible behaviour, re-stating the principle that the security of the Persian Gulf was not a matter at the end of external powers, and maintaining a simultaneously cooperative and competitive relationship with the United States. Instead, the PRC adopted a very practical and opportunistic equidistance in the relations with the two belligerents. Beijing supplied Iraq and Iran with weapons all through the conflict, maintaining significant economic ties with Baghdad, to the point that, for instance, by 1987, 'Iraq had become Beijing's number one market for contracted projects (construction services), valued at US\$670.04 million, or over 18 percent of the total.'<sup>398</sup> A 1983 Washington Post article described China's peculiar and rather opportunistic economic relationship with the two belligerents as follows:

One immediate benefit is China's fast-growing economic presence in the area. Last week, China and Iran agreed to a 150 percent increase in trade this year, with two-way exchanges to reach \$500 million. The agreement unexpectedly propelled Tehran into first place among Peking's Middle East trading partners. Meanwhile, Peking draws badly needed foreign exchange from Iraq by exporting Chinese work gangs. The 20,000 Chinese contract labourers now building Iraqi factories and repairing oil pipelines net most of the estimated \$2 billion that China earns annually from this human export to gulf states.<sup>399</sup>

Both positions anticipated some conflictual trends that characterise the performance of the *friendly stakeholder* role. For instance, in 1987, China rejected the idea brought in by the Iranians during a meeting between the vice-FM Mohammad Javid Larijani and Vice Premier Wan Li that peace could only be reached through the defeat of Iraq and the punishment of Saddam Hussein. Such an idea was not only against Beijing's balancing attempt between Iraq and Iran – something the Iranian were undoubtedly aware of – but also unacceptable in the context of the PRC's support for a peaceful, UN-mediated resolution of the conflict. In other words, the Chinese made clear to the Iranians that a solution to the War would have implied a regime change in Baghdad was unacceptable. The reasons

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<sup>398</sup> Shichor, 'Decisionmaking in Triplicate', p.195

<sup>399</sup> Michael Weisskopf, 'China Plays Both Sides In Persian Gulf War', *The Washington Post*, 13 January 1983

were twofold. First, despite the IRI's military operations gaining momentum in the final part of the War, the conflict was increasingly internationalised, with the risks of confrontation between the US and Iran growing exponentially. Therefore, foreseeing a victory on the ground for Iran was unrealistic, especially in the short term. Secondly, it can be argued that, beyond the prominent commercial logic, one of the reasons behind the Chinese decision to supply arms to both the belligerents could be attributed to the strategic calculus that the collapse of one of the two regimes would have led to reshuffle in the regional distribution of power potentially unfavourable to the PRC.<sup>400</sup> The defeat of Iraq – if ever possible – would have undermined that strategic calculus, other than risking opening Pandora's box of regional chaos that China was certainly not looking forward to dealing with.

Therefore, while still in its role-taking phase, China's role in Sino-Iranian relations faced two defining inter-role conflicts: the one with China's emerging responsible excellent power status and the other with Beijing's equally emerging balancing strategy in the Middle East. The *role* was shaped by these two conflicts and, to an extent, incorporated them into its *stakeholder* component: the Chinese conduct during the Iraq-Iran War showed the Iranians that the PRC would prioritise its overarching interests while also trying to mediate them to maintain and expand the partnership with Iran. But the latter would not come at the expense of the former.

### **The role-enactment phase: the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from Iran and the nuclear negotiations (2003-15)**

In June 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died. Khomeini arguably was the main inspirator of the 1979 Revolution and indeed the leader of the faction that, in the aftermath of the revolutionary momentum, prevailed over the others, giving the new subject that emerged from the turmoil of the Revolution its current aspect: the Islamic Republic. After the foundation of the IRI, Khomeini took the highest leadership role in the political organisation of the new state, becoming the Supreme Leader. Yet, Khomeini's departure happened in an extraordinary continuity with the Iraq-Iran War. The Supreme Leader died less than a year after Iran accepted the cease-fire imposed by the UNSC resolution 598. Symbolically and practically, the eleventh month between July 1988 and June 1989 concluded the first decade of the

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<sup>400</sup>Shichor, 'Decisionmaking in Triplicate', p.198



IRI. It opened up a new phase, dominated by the post-War reconstruction, a new leadership, a reformed Constitution, and a more pragmatic, less romantic approach to foreign policy, inspired by the ultimate goal of the survival of the Islamic Republic. In 1989, the IRI entered its Second Republic.<sup>401</sup>

In an equally remarkable overlap of events, 1989 was an exceptional year for China and the World. A day after Khomeini's death, on June 4, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered the central part of Beijing killing thousands of students engaged in pro-democracy protests. What became known as the Tiananmen Square massacre turned out to be one of the most defining moments of China's contemporary history, profoundly influencing the PRC's relations with the United States in the post-Cold War era – perhaps second only to the 1995-6 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Five months later, on November 9, a crowd gathered at several checkpoints between East and West Germany in Berlin. In the late evening, the DDR borders force decided to open the gates, allowing the cheering mass of Eastern Germans to freely enter the Federal Republic of Germany. It was the fall of the Berlin Wall, perhaps the most symbolic of the revolutions, that, two years later, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

The two historical episodes associated with the enactment phase of the *friendly stakeholder* role are rooted in the regional and global dynamics that emerged in 1989. Both episodes are consistent with the tenets and dynamics that emerged and were incorporated into the *role* during the role-taking phase. From the 1990s, Sino-Iranian relations grew in complexity and significance as a result of both the natural consolidation of their mutual partnership after the first pioneering phase and Beijing's energy-driven increasing interest in the Persian Gulf. The new bilateral, regional, and global dynamic continued shaping and adjusting China's *friendly stakeholder* role. The 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from critical cooperation with Iran proved its resilience more than ever while showing the compelling influence that the United States have on Beijing's relations with the IRI. The PRC's involvement in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 ferried the *role* toward the era of Xi Jinping – a new, more profound phase of Chinese engagement with the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>401</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini. The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995)

## **The 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from nuclear and missile cooperation with Iran**

In the 1990s, China's footprint in the Middle East grew considerably and got more institutionalised with the establishment of official diplomatic relations with two key regional actors, Saudi Arabia (1990) – the last remaining among the Arab countries – and Israel (1992). Decisive propulsion to Beijing's engagement with the region in the 1990s was given by China's transition from a net exporter to a net importer of oil in 1993. Consequently, the Persian Gulf increased its strategic significance in China's energy security calculations – a new factor that reverberated in the PRC's political, economic, and strategic engagement with the region. Energy demands lubricated China's relations with Saudi Arabia, which, as noted by Jonathan Fulton, have grown to interdependence since establishing official diplomatic ties in 1990.<sup>402</sup> Although indirectly, the consolidation of China-Saudi relations added to the Sino-Iranian partnership a further element of external constraints – certainly less visible than Sino-US relations and perhaps with a less direct impact than Sino-Iraqi ties during the Iraq-Iran War. Furthermore, the 1991 Second Gulf War presented China – still badly hurt domestically and internationally from the Tiananmen events – with a crucial dilemma, perfectly described by Yitzhak Shichor:

To begin with, Beijing had to make the crucial choice between its traditional *zuoshi* (sit and watch) non-involvement policy and involvement. Given China's domestic and international predicaments, involvement was not only imperative in the negative sense (China could no longer escape its international obligations) but also and primarily in the positive sense (namely the opportunities that the conflict presented for China).<sup>403</sup>

In other words, in the post-Tiananmen, China was increasingly confronted by and pushed toward adding the dimension of international responsibility to the defining features of its great power status. As expected, this addition did not happen overnight and still appears particularly tormented. Within that context, the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from cooperation with Iran in critical sectors is representative of the enormous tensions that the PRC experienced in its relations

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<sup>402</sup> Fulton, *China's Relations*, p.106

<sup>403</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, 'Decisionmaking in Triplicate', p.202

with the United States during the first decade following the end of the Cold War. Yet, before describing the course of events that led to one of the most traumatic moments in the history of PRC-IRI relations, it is essential to expand the context around which it happened.

In the five years following the 1991 Second Gulf War, the anti-hegemonic dimension of Sino-Iranian relations reached its peak. Indeed, the intersection of the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, the emergence of the post-Cold War unipolar moment, the hawkish China policy of the Clinton administration, which took office in 1993 and linked the progress of Sino-American relations to the respect of human rights, and the escalation over Taiwan in 1995-6 favoured the resurgence of the anti-hegemonic rhetoric between China and Iran. In other words, the PRC appeared more prone than ever to reciprocate the IRI's demand for inking the anti-hegemonic element at the core of China's role in Sino-Iranian relations. In July 1991, Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Iran and told the Iranian press that '[China is] against the domination of the US or of a minority over the world, and against the creation of the new order by the US in international relations, and [China is] in complete agreement with the Islamic Republic on this point.'<sup>404</sup> However, Li's dedication to Iran's militant anti-hegemonic struggle stopped short of embracing Tehran's request for active support against the US and Israel, with which the PRC established diplomatic relations the following year.<sup>405</sup> Subsequent diplomatic encounters between Chinese and Iranian officials demonstrated that the emerging unipolar moment was a great source of ideational momentum for Sino-Iranian relations. Yet, the apparent stretch in the ideational dimension of China's *friendly stakeholder* role was not matched by an equal recalibration of the structural dimension. Similar to the decision not to follow Tehran's militancy against Israel, the PRC did not reciprocate Iran's demand for the practical establishment of an anti-hegemonic coalition to counter the United States. The limits of the anti-hegemonic partnership were still apparent. Nonetheless, China continued and even increased its cooperation with Iran in several critical areas, including nuclear and military cooperation. From 1993, the Clinton administration's aggressive policies toward China and Iran provided further ground for the two countries to stretch their anti-

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<sup>404</sup> As quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.107

<sup>405</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.107

hegemonic discourse. The PRC criticised the Iran-Iraq Non-Proliferation Act – passed by the US Congress in 1992 and endorsed by the Clinton administration in the “dual containment” policy – as a hegemonic policy that unjustifiably violated Iran’s sovereignty. Similarly, Tehran expressed solidarity with Beijing’s frustration over the US link between China’s Most Favoured Nation status and China’s poor human rights record.<sup>406</sup> Yet, even during the 1995 visit to Beijing of the Iranian FM Velayati – in a time in which the US pressure over Iran was increasing considerably – the PRC substantially refused to translate the anti-hegemonic rhetoric that framed the meeting between Velayati and Li – who agreed on the opportunity to expand Sino-Iranian relations – into an anti-US coalition of countries dissatisfied with the post-Cold War unipolarity.<sup>407</sup> Notably, Sino-Iranian relations demonstrated their peculiar way of running at two speeds. Throughout the first half of the 1990s, the rhetoric that sustains China’s *friendly stakeholder* role was on full display and running at full steam, with the expansion of bilateral relations somehow keeping the pace. Vice versa, the Iranian ambitions to make the partnership with Beijing the core of a broader anti-hegemonic coalition targeted at the United States were consistently rejected by the PRC, signalling the structural limits of the partnership. In other words, where the ideational dimension of the role was conveniently stretched to accommodate the boiling climate of China-US-Iran relations, the structural dimension showed all its rigidity.

Between 1995 and 1996, China and the United States entered one of the last four decades' most acute and dangerous crises.<sup>408</sup> After a year of provocations, increasing political tensions, and controlled escalation over Taiwan, in January 1996, in concomitance with the campaign for Taiwan’s first popular presidential election, the People’s Liberation Army amassed between 100000 and 150000 troops in the Fujian Province. In the following three months, China carried out multiple military exercises, including launching missiles in the water space close to the coast of Taiwan. The United States called the PRC’s moves “reckless” and “provocative” and responded by sending two aircraft carrier battle groups to the

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., pp.111-2

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., pp.112-3

<sup>408</sup> For a detailed description of the significance, meanings, and results of the 1996-7 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, see, for instance: Robert S. Ross, ‘The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force’, *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2000), pp. 87-123

area – the ‘largest [US] naval movement in the Asia-Pacific region since the Vietnam War.’<sup>409</sup> Cross-strait tensions were at their peak, with the direct military involvement of the United States casting a worrying shadow on a potential escalation. The days before the March 23 Taiwan presidential elections, China held its last ground, air, naval, and missile exercise, putting an end to the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Respectable scholars have described the 1995-6 crisis as a success of China’s coercive diplomacy, as the PRC was able to manage the escalation short of military conflict and ‘[got] Taipei and Washington to take China’s warnings seriously and resulting in a more chastened and less boisterous Taiwanese independence movement.’<sup>410</sup> Concurrently, however, the crisis opened up a debate in Beijing about the future conduct of the relations with Washington, sparked by a reflection among Chinese elites that the PRC’s provocative behaviours toward Taiwan could isolate it and, perhaps, even cause a pre-emptive US military response. As a result, China re-calibrated its policy toward the United States in a more conciliatory fashion.<sup>411</sup> Therefore, given that the Clinton administration was mainly focused on containing Iran’s malign activities in the Middle East, as well as deeply concerned with the advancement of Tehran’s nuclear programme, the partnership with the IRI provided the PRC with a handy card to play with Washington to facilitate a return to a sort of pre-crisis *status quo*.

In the aftermath of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Clinton administration began courting China to stop nuclear and missile cooperation with Iran more intensively. Washington’s effort was successful and led to the most traumatic disruption in the PRC-IRI partnership after the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1982. The history of Sino-Iranian nuclear cooperation is not particularly long. Yet, China played a decisive role in helping the IRI to develop its nuclear facilities and expertise in the pioneering phase of the 1980s, up until the mid-1990s, when the Iranian nuclear programme was probably already advanced enough to include a covert military dimension that was then publicly exposed in 2002 by an Iranian dissident group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran. In 1985, during his visit

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<sup>409</sup> Chen Quimao, ‘The Taiwan Strait Crisis: Its Crux and Solutions’, *Asia Survey*, Vol.36, No.11 (1996), p.1055

<sup>410</sup> Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.189

<sup>411</sup> Avery Goldstein, ‘The Diplomatic Face of China’s Grand Strategy: A Rising Power’s Emerging Choice,’ *China Quarterly* 168 (2001): 835–64

to Beijing, President Rafsanjani agreed with the Chinese on a protocol for cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The agreement was secret, as most of the Sino-Iranian nuclear cooperation until China joined the NPT in 1992. In 1990, China and Iran concluded a ten-year agreement that included joint nuclear cooperation, which, for the first time, the official news agency Xinhua made public. A year later, after signing a contract with the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) for supplying a 27-megawatt reactor capable of producing plutonium, China secretly sent Iran 1600 kg of uranium products. This supply of different uranium products was crucial for advancing Iran's practical knowledge of the nuclear fuel cycle: Iranian scientists conducted 113 undeclared experiments in the early 1990s (only disclosed to the IAEA in 2003). According to Garver, 'China's supply of the raw material for these covert experiments, plus its extensive nuclear cooperation with Iran at this juncture, strongly suggests that China knew of Iran's covert nuclear experiments.'<sup>412</sup> Then, in 1992, during another visit of President Rafsanjani to China, accompanied by the Defense Minister Torkan, the IRI and the PRC signed another, more ambitious agreement for nuclear cooperation, which provided for Chinese assistance in the construction of several 300-megawatts nuclear power plants in Iran. Contextually, the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) began negotiating with Tehran on the construction of a heavy-water reactor, a device that 'United States officials considered [...] to be a plutonium production plant and as further evidence of Iran's intention of acquiring nuclear weapons.'<sup>413</sup> Ultimately, under US pressure, China blocked the CNNC's deal. Finally, in 1994, China and Iran agreed to cooperate on the construction of two large facilities for the production of uranium hexafluoride – one of those was designed to produce uranium metal, which usually constitutes the explosive cores of atomic bombs.<sup>414</sup> From then on, Washington began putting pressure on China to stop nuclear cooperation with Iran.

An aspect should be reiterated. The twelve years of intense Chinese cooperation with Iran in the nuclear field were a fundamental lubricant of Sino-Iranian relations. Nuclear cooperation was also essential in China's role-taking, satisfying Iran's demands on what was both a highly strategic and highly symbolic

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<sup>412</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.147

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152

area of cooperation. For the IRI, the nuclear programme symbolised independence and a source of pride. Chinese assistance came after Western partners substantially abandoned nuclear cooperation with Iran after the 1979 Revolution. As much as the arms supply relationship during the Iraq-Iran War, China's assistance to the Iranian nuclear programme, which was initiated during the Imposed War, helped Iran advance its strategic objective of emerging from profound isolation. All these reasons made the 1996-7 disengagement particularly traumatic: the IRI's most crucial nuclear partner capitulated to the hegemonic pressure of Iran's archenemy, the United States.

In 1995, China and the United States began negotiating the terms through which China would have stopped its assistance to the Iranian nuclear programme. Notably, the first concession that the PRC made was the cancellation of the 300-megawatts sales to the IRI that happened amid the Chinese built-up in the Taiwan Strait, at a stage in which the Beijing-Washington tensions over Taiwan were escalating.<sup>415</sup> Yet, it was after the trauma of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in mid-1996 that

‘Washington set four goals on arms control, [two of which explicitly related to Iran]. China was to be induced to give up all nuclear cooperation with Iran, even cooperation permitted under international law. China was to agree to suspend contracts to sell Iran cruise missiles that posed an “over the horizon” threat to Persian Gulf shipping.’<sup>416</sup>

The Clinton administration made the abovementioned points the fundamental prerequisites for the 1985 US-China Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreement certification.<sup>417</sup> Then, in an attempt to persuade China by focusing on areas of convergence rather than areas of strategic disagreement, US officials used the card of the common interest in the security of the oil and commercial routes passing through the Persian Gulf – an argument that was certainly appealing to the PRC, which was increasingly dependent upon oil imports from the Persian Gulf. Washington's view was that practically empowering Iran with cruise missiles and helping it in its opaque nuclear programme was a source of insecurity for the region. Given that one of the tenets of China's *friendly stakeholder* role was the recognition

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<sup>415</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.220

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.221-2

<sup>417</sup> Gill, *Chinese Arms Exports*, p.65

of Iran as a pivotal actor in the Persian Gulf and that the strategic value of the IRI as a powerful counterbalance to the United States' hegemony in the region was not negligible, Washington's argument presented the PRC with a conundrum. By mid-1996, once the crisis in the Taiwan Strait was resolved, Sino-US negotiations intensified with several meetings at the vice-ministerial level, which culminated in two letters sent by the Foreign Minister Qian Qichen to the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in which China committed to stopping the current and future nuclear cooperation with Iran.<sup>418</sup> In November 1997, then, China agreed to end the sales of C-801 and C-802 cruise missiles to the IRI.<sup>419</sup> Ultimately, the October 1997 Clinton-Jiang meeting testified the beginning of a new phase in China-US relations, which had as one of its propulsive *quid pro quo* the abrupt halt of Chinese cooperation with Iran in two critical areas. Unsurprisingly, the Iranian reaction was bitter.

***The apex of the inter-role conflict between the friendly stakeholder and the responsible great power roles***

John Garver rightly associates the 1996-7 Chinese choice to disengage from nuclear and missile cooperation with the Islamic Republic with a shift in Beijing's attitude toward the United States after the troubled years between the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and the 1995-6 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. With China aiming to adopt a less confrontational attitude toward Washington, the Iran Card was undoubtedly a tempting one – even more so considering that the soon-to-publicly-emerge covert military dimension of the IRI's nuclear programme was something China would avoid being explicitly associated with. Here, I argue that the concept of inter-role conflict best describes the nuances of China's decision to partially disengage from cooperation with Iran and the subsequent reparatory measures adopted by Beijing to recover and sustain its partnership with Tehran.

The October 1997 visit to the United States of President Jiang Zemin marked the Chinese attempt to relaunch its relationship with Washington after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. The visit, the same in which Jiang pledged that China would have stopped nuclear and cruise missile cooperation with the IRI, emerged

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<sup>418</sup> Garver, China and Iran, p.225

<sup>419</sup> Willem van Kemenade, 'Iran's Relations with China and the West', *Clingendael Diplomacy Papers*, No.24 (2009), p.56



as historical, with the two great powers using for the first time the term “partnership” to describe their relations. Equally notable, in the contour of the Clinton-Jiang summit, the Chinese President publicly floated on two different occasions the idea that the US and China share a “common responsibility.”<sup>420</sup> On its initiative and with a push from Washington, Beijing was increasingly embracing the *responsible great power* role. The process, arguably, had arms control and non-proliferation at its core. In the first half of the 1990s, China joined the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), joined the NPT in 1992 and committed to its indefinite extension during the 1995 review, and in 1996 signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as the culmination of a path that was intimately related with the PRC’s emerging identity as *responsible great power*.<sup>421</sup>

As such, this emerging dimension of growing responsibility, autonomously acquired and externally induced, with non-proliferation as one of its tenets, was substantially incompatible with nuclear cooperation with a country, the Islamic Republic, that was pursuing a covert nuclear programme with a potential military dimension. Notably, although China capitulated to US demands regarding the termination of its nuclear cooperation with Iran, it resisted Washington’s pressure to do the same with Pakistan. As Garver suggests, this was a sign of the different place that Pakistan and Iran had in China’s broader strategic calculations and of stronger Sino-Pakistani ties.<sup>422</sup> Examining the 1996-7 events as the outcome of an inter-role conflict suggests that, in the 1990s, the PRC was involved in the critical role-taking phase of the *responsible great power* primary role. Therefore, rather than assuming the absolute incompatibility between the *responsible stakeholder* and *responsible great power* roles, it appears more reasonable to consider that the initial role-taking phase of a primary role, which had the United States as the main significant other and the international community as the critical audience, required China an extra effort and some extra concession. Nuclear cooperation with Iran was at the convenient intersection of several crucial dynamics. First, arguably, it was significantly more critical at the bilateral level of Sino-Iranian relations than as part of China’s broader strategic vision. Second, Iran’s nuclear programme had a covert

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<sup>420</sup> Hoo, *China’s Global Identity*, p.59

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid*, p.48; and Bates Gill and Evan S. Medeiros, ‘Foreign and Domestic Influences on China’s Arms Control and Nonproliferation Policies’, *China Quarterly*, No.161 (2000)

<sup>422</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.155

dimension incompatible with the tenets of the *responsible great power* role. Third, the Clinton administration, the primary significant other in China's role-taking since 1993, and even more so in the post-Taiwan crisis, had one of its strategic priorities in the containment of Iran. The sum of these factors made nuclear cooperation with Iran expandable in the specific phase of China's role-taking of a primary international role. What I argue, therefore, is that albeit there is an intrinsic element of conflict between China's *role* in the partnership with Iran and the *responsible great power* role – derived from the opposed location and hierarchical position they occupy on the map of the PRC's international roles, and the tensions intrinsic to the China-US-Iran triad –, the conflict management reflects the state of the two roles, the relational dynamics between the actors involved and the primary audiences, and the specific opportunities existing at that given historical moment. The question, therefore, turns out to be how China was able to keep the *responsible stakeholder* role alive after the 1996-7 disengagement from nuclear and cruise missiles cooperation with Iran profoundly questioned one of the ideational tenets of the role – its anti-hegemonic dimension – and hit an area of cooperation that was critical in helping the PRC to build ties with the IRI and take the *responsible stakeholder* role.

Downplaying the warning that China's abstention at the UN that facilitated the US intervention in the 1991 Gulf War could have severely damaged Sino-Arab relations, Yitzhak Shichor noted that 'this did not happen, nor could have, given the history of Sino-Arab relations. Earlier frictions have always been forgotten and forgiven (which is true of many countries).'<sup>423</sup> The same can be said about the impact of the Chinese termination of nuclear and missiles cooperation with Iran. Yet even assuming that the Iranians would have been forced by their substantial international isolation to forgive China and maintain the same level of cooperation with it, the described events put significant pressure on the *role* enacted by the PRC. This less firm and perhaps less forgiving superstructure demanded some care. Therefore, Beijing's overarching response that allowed the preservation of the *responsible stakeholder* role from the impact of 1996-7 disengagement was multi-layered and reflected the PRC's interest in continuing pursuing the partnership with the IRI after the unprecedented blow.

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<sup>423</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, 'Decisionmaking in Triplicate', p.210

A chance for China to initiate restoring the partnership with Iran emerged concurrently with the Sino-US negotiations over the Iranian nuclear and missile programmes. In 1996, the United States Congress approved the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which was in legislative continuation with two executive orders issued by the Clinton administration the year before that targeted Iran's nuclear programme and the IRI's malign behaviours in the Middle East. The Act introduced, for the first time in the history of Washington's economic statecraft, extraterritorial sanctions, imposing penalties on US and foreign entities investing more than USD 20 million in the Iranian and Libyan oil sector. The international reaction to ILSA was bitter. The Europeans strongly criticised the extraterritorial nature of the sanction regime established by the Act, to the point that the Clinton administration never enforced ILSA. Therefore, Europeans and Japanese oil majors did not exit the Iranian market, cutting lucrative deals with the IRI, including a USD 850 million contract with Dutch Royal Shell in 1999 and a preferential right for exploring the Azadegan oil field President Khatami granted to Japanese firms a year later. Vice versa, the Chinese oil majors, initially remained more cautious than their Western equivalent, fearing that the less favourable sentiment in the US would have potentially pushed the Clinton administration and the Congress to take a different course of action and decide to enforce the 1996 Act, imposing sanctions of Chinese oil companies investing in Iran. Nonetheless, after the initial scepticism, comforted and pushed by the non-punishment of European and Japanese majors, the Chinese returned to the Iranian oil market, signing several lucrative deals in the early 2000s.<sup>424</sup> Notably, in 2003, the Chinese oil giant SINOPEC even attempted to replace the hesitant Japanese companies, which were under tremendous US pressure given the mounting nuclear crisis with Iran, in the contract for the development of the Azadegan oil field, swinging the message that 'SINOPEC is paying no attention to the US request [to withdraw from the bidding].'<sup>425</sup> Overall, a more robust signal that China would have invested in the Iranian oil sector despite the *sword of Damocles* of ILSA rather than the cautious, wait-and-see approach would have worked better with the Iranians to immediately compensate for the trauma that was unfolding at the Clinton-Jiang summit. Yet, this would have been

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<sup>424</sup> Scita, *China-Iran Relations*, pp.91-92

<sup>425</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.271

beyond what China could have realistically done, given the unprecedentedly delicate Sino-US-Iranian entanglement of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the very fact that, in 1997 and 1998, the PRC maintained alive the energy relations with the IRI, signing prospective development agreements and transferring oil equipment to Iran, was a signal that the stop at nuclear and cruise missile cooperation was not a sign that China was backing down from the partnership with Iran.

As the primary ideational response, on the eve of the new millennium, China relaunched the anti-hegemonic discourse and, once again, inked the idea of Sino-Iranian friendship as the theme of the visit to China by the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in June 2000. The return of the anti-hegemonic refrain was facilitated by the War in Kosovo and the US accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade – an incident that fuelled the nationalist discourse in China and helped re-gaining some sympathy in Tehran. Then, the official joint communiqué that followed the Khatami’s June 2000 visit – the first of an Iranian President since 1989 – described that the outcome of the visit was:

A twenty- first-century-oriented, long-term and wide-ranging relationship of friendship and cooperation in the strategic interests of the two countries on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.<sup>426</sup>

In more practical terms, China and Iran agreed to establish a “political consultation mechanism” that assured regular exchange at the vice foreign ministerial level, giving the partnership a significant level of institutionalisation. In the early 2000s, the PRC demonstrated it wanted to concretely expand its relations with the IRI at the political and economic levels. Accordingly, China sustained the effort of Khatami to launch the UN agenda of the “dialogue among civilisation”.<sup>427</sup> The proposal aimed to improve relations between Iran and the United States, rejecting the rhetoric of the “clash of civilisation” that was gaining popularity after the publication of Samuel Huntington’s best seller of the same title. On the economic front, China supported Iran’s unsuccessful bid to join the World Trade Organisation, of which Beijing became a member in 2001. Concurrently, the PRC

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<sup>426</sup> As quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.118

<sup>427</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.119

and the IRI substantially increased the level of bilateral trade, including the Chinese imports of Iranian crude, which ‘increased by 84 percent over the previous year [1999]. In 2001 they increased another 55 percent.’<sup>428</sup>

Ultimately, one of the long-term, more subtle results of the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement was to bring some public disenchantment in the Iranian’s view of their place in China’s global projection. In the words of Iranian newspapers, ‘the PRC will never sacrifice its relations with the United States for Iran,’ and ‘China never great involved in military or political blocs for or against the interests of another country.’<sup>429</sup> Arguably, this was an essential step in internalising China’s hierarchy of roles in the *responsible stakeholder* role.

### **The 2003-2015 nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1**

The twelve years of seesawing negotiations between the IRI and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) arguably led to one of the most crucial successes of international diplomacy applied to non-proliferation. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), approved in 2015, limited the extent and scope of the Iranian nuclear programme to its civilian dimension, imposing a tight control regime over Tehran’s nuclear activities provided by the watchdogs of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). As a permanent member of the UNSC, China was involved in the negotiations, playing a limited-yet-non negligible part, which evolved over the twelve years, reflecting different domestic and external inputs and emerging opportunities. Ultimately, the PRC was more successful than in 1996-7 in balancing the enactment of the *friendly stakeholder* role and its responsibility as a great power. China’s ability to navigate through the tensions and demands generated by the concurrent performance of the two roles was particularly evident in two phases of the negotiations: the debate and ultimate imposition of six rounds of UNSC sanctions on Iran between 2006 and 2010 and the final part of the negotiations (2013-2015) in which China was arguably able to jump on the positive momentum generated by the election of Hassan Rouhani in Iran, and taking a more prominent role in the negotiations with

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> As quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.117

little costs compared to the significant gains, and a more conciliatory relationship between the *friendly stakeholder* and the *responsible great power* roles.

As suggested in the analysis of the previous historical episode, before the public exposure in 2002, the US intelligence community and China had evidence and straightforward suggestions that the IRI had a covert nuclear programme since at least the early 1990s. Yet, on the 14 of August 2002, the exiled opposition group called the National Council of Resistance of Iran publicly revealed the existence of two undisclosed nuclear facilities – a uranium enrichment plant in Natanz and a heavy water facility in Arak – that shed light on the IRI’s somewhat ambiguous atomic programme. The international community had to react to a mounting non-proliferation issue, and the Europeans took the lead. After the revelations, the atmosphere in the Middle East heated up considerably, with the option of a military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities began floating around in Washington and Tel Aviv.<sup>430</sup> France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, later known as the E3, joined their diplomatic force to engage Iran constructively and de-escalate the situation. The European effort was motivated by security, normative, and economic concerns. First, the Iranian nuclear crisis was unfolding concurrently with the US invasion of Iraq, which began in March 2003 without the support of the UN Security Council. London joined Washington in the Iraqi campaign. Yet, the fear that a military escalation with Iran would have put its troop stationed in southern Iraq in great danger. More broadly, the Europeans feared the security and political implication of initiating a second major military conflict in the Middle East.<sup>431</sup> On the normative side, the bitter experience of the unfolding of the invasion of Iraq pushed the E3 to take the lead and push for multilateral diplomatic engagement – eventually under the institutionalised framework of the UN – instead of the unilateral use of force that contrasted the tenets of the emerging EU foreign policy. Similarly, a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear question was perceived as crucial for the survival of the non-proliferation regime.<sup>432</sup> Lastly, it is also plausible that the Europeans had

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<sup>430</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran’s Nuclear Crisis: Lead Groups and EU Foreign Policy-Making* (New York: Springer, 2018), p.100; and Bill Keller, ‘The Thinkable’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 4 May 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/04/magazine/the-thinkable.html>

<sup>431</sup> Kelsey Davenport and Elizabeth Phillip, ‘A French View on the Iran Deal: An Interview with Ambassador Gérard Araud’, *Arms Control Association*, 2016. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-07/interviews/french-view-iran-deal-interview-ambassador-g%C3%A9rard-araud>

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

an underlying economic incentive to peacefully resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis given the historically good economic relations that Continental Europe has maintained with Iran even after the 1979 Revolution – a direct incentive that was not on Washington’s table. Thanks to the initial European engagement effort and the successful promotion of the “effective multilateralism” approach, the Iranian nuclear issue took a long and tortuous diplomatic path, resolved more than a decade later with the approval of the JCPoA.<sup>433</sup>

The US invasion of Iraq was also a crucial moment for China. Albeit the PRC kept a lower profile than France, Germany, and Russia in criticising Washington’s unilateral decision to invade Iraq, the Chinese had significant concerns regarding the potential impact that the war would have had on China’s energy security, given both the growing reliance on the Persian Gulf as oil hub and the significant Chinese investment in the Iraqi oil sector. As a result, ‘China began to increase its oil imports frantically, mainly from Africa and Russia, in February 2003, just one month before the outbreak of the war.’<sup>434</sup> Yet, as Shichor brilliantly suggests, the PRC’s less vociferous opposition to the US invasion of Iraq might reflect a more advanced Chinese decision-making at play, which thoroughly considered the economic, political, and strategic costs of the adoption of a lower profile.<sup>435</sup> However, the contextual public exposition of Iran’s covert nuclear activities presented China with another significant conundrum to solve. It is analytically productive, especially in the context of this analysis, to divide the Chinese interactions with the negotiations to solve the Iranian nuclear issue into three phases: the first one comprised between 2003 and 2006; the second one between 2006 and 2010, which overlaps with the crucial voting on UNSC Iran sanctions; and the final leg between 2010 and 2015, with particular emphasis on the last two years of negotiations.

During the first phase (2003-2006), China was particularly active in articulating the broader positions it would have maintained throughout the nuclear

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<sup>433</sup> On the extraordinary and remarkably successful effort of the European Union to avoid a military confrontation over the Iranian nuclear programme after the 2002 revelations, see: Tarja Cronberg, ‘No EU, no Iran deal: the EU’s choice between multilateralism and the transatlantic link’, *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol.24, No.3-4 (2018), pp.243-259; and Riccardo Alcaro, *Europe and Iran’s Nuclear Crisis*.

<sup>434</sup> Shichor, ‘Decisionmaking in Triplicate’, p.213

<sup>435</sup> Shichor, ‘Decisionmaking in Triplicate’

negotiations. John Calabrese sums them into three core principles: '(1) no intervention in the domestic affairs of another country; (2) no nuclear proliferation; (3) and no disruption of energy supply from the Middle East.'<sup>436</sup> As apparent, the tenets of the Chinese nonproliferation position were relatively generic and substantially – perhaps purposely – consistent with the development of a median position between the support for Iran and an acceptable stance vis-à-vis the proliferation concerns expressed by the international community. Overall, the PRC defended Iran's right to pursue a peaceful nuclear programme, making clear that Tehran should remain consistent with the obligations and rights established by the NPT. Beijing also opposed the imposition of sanctions on Iran, consistently with the position that first emerged during the hostage crisis in 1979-80. The support for Iran was accompanied by clear opposition to an Iranian military nuclear programme and calls for Tehran to cooperate with the international community and IAEA, and thus welcomed Iran's signature of the Additional protocol in 2003. Between 2003 and 2006, Chinese and Iranian officials met several times to discuss the nuclear issue. Chinese President Hu Jintao had telephone conversations on the matter with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and US President George W. Bush.<sup>437</sup> At the 2004 IAEA debates on the Iranian nuclear programme, China supported Iran, expressing its trust in Iran's declaration that the nuclear programme was only for civil purposes. As Garver notes, this was a crucial show of trust that pleased the Iranians in a time of unprecedented international pressure.<sup>438</sup> Overall, China expressed support for the European and Russian initiatives during the first years of negotiations, sticking with the idea that the issue should have remained under the competency of the IAEA and not passed to the UNSC. Arguably, the Chinese interest in having the Iranian nuclear issue not referred to the Security Council was an implicit admission to the Iranians that, in that case, the PRC would not have been in the position to use its veto power in favour of the IRI. This was made explicit during the 2004 visit of Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing to Tehran. In the official press conference following the meeting with his Iranian counterpart, answering a question about China's possible use of the Veto power said, ' Veto cannot be used

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<sup>436</sup> Calabrese, *China and Iran Mismatched Partners*, p.10

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>438</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, p.163



extensively since there are special limits to that.’<sup>439</sup> The message for Tehran was clear. In August 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new Iranian administration entered a collision course with the international community, culminating in Iran’s escalation in non-compliance with the IAEA, including the restart of a uranium conversion plant near Esfahan and resuming its nuclear enrichment programme in early 2006. Consequently, in February 2006, the IAEA Board of Governors voted to report the IRI to the Security Council. China aligned itself with the majority of the board, voting against Iran. From this point, the Iranian nuclear issue was in the hands of the P5+1 group.

Concurrently to the 2005-6 Iranian nuclear escalation, the United States was calling China to take responsibility as great power more vocally than ever. On 21 September 2005, the US Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick made the infamous call for China to act as a *responsible stakeholder*.<sup>440</sup> Zoellick’s words were not directly a reference to the PRC’s behaviour in the nuclear negotiations. Yet, they got the attention of Hua Liming, the former Chinese Ambassador to Tehran and a veteran of Sino-Iranian relations. In 2006, Hua published an article entitled ‘The Iran Nuclear Issue and China’s Diplomatic Choice,’ whose conclusions were an explicit answer to Zoellick’s call:

However, as the United States and Iran distrust each other due to long estrangement and accumulated rancour, there must be an influential big country to mediate and shuttle between them and put forward plans of settlement for them to bargain on. China can and should play this role. The reasons for it are as follows: First, China advocates for building a harmonious world. When such serious confrontation occurs in the world, China, as a responsible big country, should not sit idle. Norway is not a big country, but in the 1990s, it succeeded in helping bring Palestine and Israel into reconciliation and sign the Oslo Accords. Though peace between Palestine and Israel was breached later, the world still appreciates the contributions to peace Norway has made. China should be able to do what Norway has been able to do. Second, China and the United States maintain a good relationship. China's efforts to mitigate antagonism between the United States and Iran and improve their relations will have a positive impact on China-U.S. relations. This is also what the "stakeholder" implies.

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<sup>439</sup> As quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.164

<sup>440</sup> “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility”, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick’s Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005. [https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration\\_Zoellick\\_remarks\\_notes06\\_winter\\_spring.pdf](https://www.ncuscr.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/04/migration_Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf)

At the same time, China keeps good relations with Iran. Iran expects China to help it extricate from the current plight. Third, the international community generally supports China in its effort to make a historic try to remove this hidden danger to world peace. Fourth, on the one hand, the United States and Iran are antagonistic toward each other, but on the other hand, they need each other strategically. The relations between the United States and Iran will sooner or later become normalised. So China should take necessary actions in advance. Making prompt mediation between the two countries and helping them dissolve antagonism is conducive to consolidating China's strategic relations with both the United States and Iran.<sup>441</sup>

Despite Hua's call, China was not yet ready to actively mediate between Washington and Tehran. Yet, Hua sowed the seeds for the more proactive Chinese approach that emerged in the final leg of the negotiations after the approval of the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) in 2013. Before that, the PRC had to extricate the knot of supporting the UNSC sanctions on Iran and preserving its relations with Tehran.

Between 2006 and 2010, the Security Council adopted six resolutions addressing the Iranian nuclear programme. Four included the imposition of sanctions on Iran and Iranian entities and subjects. China voted in favour of all six UNSC resolutions, including those imposing sanctions on Iran. The PRC's support for the three batches of sanctions imposed between 2006 and 2008 was justified by Iran's indisputable violations of its obligations to the IAEA. Therefore, China remained consistent with the general tenets of its approach to the Iranian nuclear issue. Notably, the US pressure influenced China's decision to support the UNSC resolution. As reported by the Crisis Group, 'vetoing [the resolutions] would have damaged the Sino-American relationship. President George W. Bush made a personal appeal to President Hu Jintao to support sanctions, a move that helped Hu override strong objections in Beijing.'<sup>442</sup> According to Taylor, Beijing's [and Moscow's] ultimate decision to sign the UNSC resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran "has typically only been forthcoming following a period of protracted debate and after any proposed sanctions have been watered down considerably".<sup>443</sup> In 2010, when agreeing to discuss the fourth package of UNSC sanctions, 'China

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<sup>441</sup> Hua Liming, 'The Iran Nuclear Issue and China's Diplomatic Choice,' *China International Studies*, 2006, p.103

<sup>442</sup> 'The Iranian Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing', *International Crisis Group*, 2010, p.12

<sup>443</sup> Brendan Taylor, *Sanctions as Grand Strategy* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010), p.83

made it clear that it would only agree to less wide-ranging measures than the Western powers advocated,' pushing for 'a diplomatic and peaceful resolution' of the issue.<sup>444</sup> In other words, the PRC showed a degree of reluctance in supporting UNSC sanctions on Iran. Yet, it ultimately decided to water down and then embrace the resolutions, but only after having positively assessed the impact of supporting them on its broader status as an emerging great power and having evaluated their potential effectiveness as a measure to prevent a disastrous military escalation.

The Chinese approach can be reconducted into a threefold explanation. First, the PRC has generally called for diplomacy over the use of sanctions regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. China's position, though, reflects its broader objection to the use of sanctions, which are considered a violation of sovereignty. In her study on China's approach and view of sanctions, Poh found that:

The Chinese political leadership has persistently engaged in a two-pronged counter-stigmatisation strategy, which seeks to: 1) delegitimise the approach towards sanctions adopted by the US and its allies by depicting it as an imperialist and interventionist, and 2) propose an alternative set of principles to guide inter-state relations.<sup>445</sup>

In this context, sanctions are only acceptable when imposed by the UNSC after other peaceful and non-coercive actions have been exhausted. They should 'act as a "ceiling" instead of a "floor" from which unilateral and/or regional sanctions can be further imposed.'<sup>446</sup> However, despite the traditional public calls for diplomatic engagement over coercive measures, China's direct mediation effort in the Iranian nuclear crisis remained limited up until 2009-10, when low-level Chinese mediation between Iran and the US emerged before turning into a high-level diplomatic effort during Barack Obama's first term (2013-2015).<sup>447</sup> Second, Beijing's ultimate decision to support the UNSC sanctions on Iran can be attributed to the effort to project itself as a responsible great power committed to preserving the international

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<sup>444</sup> Willem van Kemenade, 'China vs. the Western Campaign for Iran Sanctions'. *The Washington Quarterly*. Vol.33. Issue 3 (2010) pp.110-11

<sup>445</sup> Angela Poh, *Sanctions with Chinese Characteristics: Rhetoric and Restraints in China's Diplomacy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp.126-7

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125

<sup>447</sup> John W. Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', in James Reardon-Anderson (Ed.), *The Red Star & the Crescent. China and the Middle East*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2018, p.133

non-proliferation regime. Garver tracks down this objective as the one following the urgent geopolitical motives that pushed China to scale up its mediation efforts after 2013.<sup>448</sup> Yet, the Security Council appears to be the most relevant audience for such an effort. By taking a proactive role in the imposition of the four rounds of sanctions on Iran between 2006 and 2010, China successfully conjugated two discrete positions: On one side, the respect and upholding of non-proliferation norms, and on the other, the defence of the right of non-Western nations to develop peaceful nuclear programmes. Both positions are intimately connected with what Alterman has described as China's ambitions to 'articulate what it means to be a "new type of great power."'”<sup>449</sup> As described, the request to act as a “responsible stakeholder” was also made clear by the US government, making the Iran nuclear crisis a test case for China's will to define its global status. Beijing's representatives at the UNSC worked actively to water down the resolution to push Iran to the negotiations table while making clear that the Chinese position opposed any development of the Iranian nuclear programme outside the boundaries of the NPT. Therefore, the support of the UNSC resolutions sanctioning Iran allowed China to shape its role of responsible great power vis-à-vis the other permanent members of the Security Council, with the United States as a privileged audience, while, at the same time, reiterating the message that Beijing was not against the development of civil nuclear programmes by “independent-minded non-Western countries.”<sup>450</sup> Lastly, China had geopolitical and economic motivations for tempering the UNSC's resolutions while supporting multilateral measures limiting Iran's non-peaceful nuclear activities. Despite the periodic backlashes, Tehran and Beijing had cultivated 35 years of diplomatic relations forged around mutual interests at that time. For China, Iran was not only a potentially lucrative market and an important component of its energy security strategy, but its stability was critical for Beijing's domestic and regional strategic interests. Thus, the prospect of war in Iran would have had potentially disastrous consequences:

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., p.147

<sup>449</sup> John B. Alterman, 'China, the United States, and the Middle East', in James Reardon-Anderson (Ed.), *The Red Star & the Crescent. China and the Middle East* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2018), p.56

<sup>450</sup> Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', p.147

Disrupting China's energy supply from the Gulf; precipitating a global recession disastrous for China's exports; disrupting projected Western-oriented infrastructure links, and most important of all, exacerbation of internal security concerns regarding Xinjiang arising from refugees and extremism.<sup>451</sup>

Along with the paramount objective of avoiding a military conflict in the Persian Gulf, China had to protect its relationship with Iran, with energy cooperation as a top priority. Beijing actively ensured that UNSC sanctions would not harm Iran's ability to perform normal commercial and investment activities. As noted by Garver in a 2010 testimony before the US-China Economic and Review Commission,<sup>452</sup> China's activity at the Security Council came along with sustained diplomatic and political support to Iran, as well as the initial signal by Chinese energy firms of "filling the vacuum" left by their European and Asian homologues.<sup>453</sup> Indeed, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the PRC found fertile ground in Iran. The populist administration consistently looked at China as the foremost opportunity to overcome the peaking international isolation caused by the imposition of UNSC sanctions. In 2005, Ali Larijani, a still influential conservative politician who acted as Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council during the first two years of the Ahmadinejad administration, and Ahmadinejad himself sponsored the so-called "Look to the East" strategy – a comprehensive foreign policy vision that projected the IRI toward the East – and China in particular – to counter the mounting Western pressure.<sup>454</sup> Consequently, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, the PRC gained further prominence within the Iranian domestic market – not without generating a good dose of anger among the Iranians<sup>455</sup> – and, by 2009, China became Iran's major energy partner.<sup>456</sup>

The third macro phase of China's approach to the nuclear negotiations (2010-15) showed an increased and unprecedented Chinese involvement in the

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> John W. Garver, 'China's Iran Policy', *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Review Commission on "China's Current and Emerging Foreign Policy Priorities"*. April 13, 2011

<sup>453</sup> As Garver notes, China's promise of "filling the vacuum" had a substantial slowdown after 2009 with a number of deals cancelled or stalled. (See 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations' p.147)

<sup>454</sup> Fan Hongda, 'China-Iran Relations from the Perspective of Tehran's Look East Approach,' *Asian Affairs*, Vol.53, No.1, 2022, p.53

<sup>455</sup> See: Ehteshami et al., 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions'

<sup>456</sup> Garver, *China's Iran Policy*, p.9

issue, which peaked after the re-election of Barack Obama in 2013. John Garver attributes the activist shift in the PRC to five factors: (1) A renewed popularity of the ideas of Ambassador Hua Liming, who, in 2006, as presented earlier in this Chapter, called for a more active and direct Chinese effort to mediate between Washington and Tehran; (2) A tentative attempt to low-level Chinese mediation in 2009-10, which Beijing used as a testing ground before opening-up to high-level mediation efforts in 2013-2015; (3) A more receptive to mediation environment in the post-Ahmadinejad Iran; (4) Xi's ascent to power, which gave impulse to a general recalibration of Chinese foreign policy toward a more assertive interpretation of the *great power* role; (5) Renewed concerns regarding the potentially disastrous effect of a war between Iran and the United States on Chinese security and economic interests.<sup>457</sup>

Two leaked documents published by Wikileaks show that, in 2009, China offered its *bona officia* to the United States to mediate with Iran, offering 'assistance in creating a channel for communication with the Iranians.'<sup>458</sup> Such interaction was part of a broader Chinese attempt to positively translate the pressure coming from Washington and the good relations with Tehran in a low-level mediation effort. Notably, the PRC's actions coincided with the emergence of another previously undisclosed enrichment facility near Qom in 2009, which led to the approval of the fourth package of UNSC sanctions in 2010. It is reasonable to assume that the bellicose rhetoric adopted by the newly elected Obama administration, the "stick" part of its infamous carrot and stick approach, which requested the Pentagon to design military plans to strike Iran's facility, worried China enough to move its sideline diplomatic engagement to a more central spot.<sup>459</sup> Albeit not particularly successful in bringing a breakthrough in the negotiations, the first low-level Chinese mediation effort set the base for a more visible role in 2013. The intersection of three favourable macro-dynamics emerged in late 2012 and unfolded in the following year. Iran's staunch resistance was not paying off, especially with the mounting pressure of UNSC, US, and European sanctions

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<sup>457</sup> Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', pp.124-5

<sup>458</sup> Deputy Secretary Steinberg's conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (29 September 2009) – Cable id: #09BEIJING2963, *Wikileaks*, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING560\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING560_a.html)

<sup>459</sup> See, Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', p.131; and 'The Iranian Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing'.

working together and hitting Iran's primary source of revenues – the oil exports. In the 2013 Presidential election, Hassan Rouhani obtained the mandate on the promise of a radically different approach from his predecessor. Rouhani's economic first approach was inevitably linked to the conclusion of the nuclear question and the removal of international sanctions. Three months after its assignment, the Rouhani administration and P5+1 signed the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), an initial agreement that paved the way for the JCPOA. The Rouhani administration's ill-concealed objective of positively concluding the nuclear negotiations was reciprocated by the same desire of the Obama administration. The rapprochement between the two archenemies was indirectly sealed by Xi Jinping's ascension to power, who took office as Secretary-General of the CCP in November 2012. Xi's paramount project, the Belt and Road Initiative – at that time known as the One Belt, One Road project – revealed the unprecedented global ambitions of a PRC that appeared ready to complete the ascension to the great power status. Arguably, having Chinese imprinting on the Iran deal could have helped Beijing cultivate the message of responsibility attached to the *great power* role for almost two and a half decades. In September 2013, Xi met with Rouhani on the sideline of the annual SCO general meeting. The nuclear issue was at the core of the talks between the two leaders.<sup>460</sup> From that point on, China's active mediation included continuous interactions with the Iranians at the high, mid, and low-ministerial levels and several public proposals that set the ground for the PRC's renewed approach.<sup>461</sup> Notably, while the negotiations were reaching their final steps, Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Tehran (February 2015), explicitly linking Iran's participation in the BRI to the favourable resolution of the nuclear negotiations.<sup>462</sup> If China had always supported the IRI's economy, remaining a sufficiently consistent partner even when Iran was facing the most challenging international isolation, Wang was now advancing the idea that the PRC had a broader and bolder vision for the future of its international relations and if Tehran wanted to be part of that, the settlement of the nuclear issue was a necessary precondition.

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<sup>460</sup> Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', p.139

<sup>461</sup> See, Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', p.140-1; and Emma Scott, 'A Nuclear Deal with Chinese Characteristics: China's Role in the P5+1 Talks with Iran', The Jamestown Foundation's China Brief, Vol.15, No.14 (2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/a-nuclear-deal-with-chinese-characteristics-chinas-role-in-the-p51-talks-with-iran/>

<sup>462</sup> Garver, 'China and the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', p.143

On 14 July 2015, Iran and P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA), later adopted by the Security Council resolution 2231. China applauded the solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. Was China the actor that made the Iran Deal possible? Most probably, no. Yet, it emerged from the twelve years of negotiations as a winner, despite remaining on the sideline for a large part of the process. With the partial exception of the last phase of the negotiations, with a minimum effort, the PRC obtained the maximum from the process, emerging as a more credible and responsible international actor while also gaining points in Tehran. In January 2016, a week after the JCPOA implementation day, Xi Jinping paid his first visit to Iran, marking a new phase in Sino-Iranian relations.

#### *A case of successful balancing between conflicting roles*

During the twelve years of negotiations that resulted in the 2015 JCPoA, the *friendly stakeholder* role was the protagonist of an inter-role conflict in triplicate. Interesting enough, the evolution of the inter-role conflict could be visualised as a Gaussian distribution. The conflict progressively grew to reach its peak in the middle of the negotiations process, when the Iranian nuclear issue was deferred to the UNSC, and China voted in favour of the four packages of progressive sanctions on Iran. Surpassed that crisis, the conflict was not resolved. Instead, it decreased intensity as China progressively took a more prominent mediation role in the negotiations. Between 2013 and the final approval of the JCPoA in 2015, an unprecedented alignment between the demands of the Rouhani administration, the will to close the nuclear deal of the Obama administration, and Xi's push for a China more proactive in the international system created the necessary conditions for reducing the inherent inter-role conflict between the *friendly stakeholder* and *the responsible great power* roles to its historical minimum. Nonetheless, each of the three phases of China's involvement in the nuclear negotiations demonstrates how the management of inter-role conflict is ultimately related to the set of specific ideational and structural opportunities existing at that given time.

Between 2003 and 2006, China gave Iran a non-negligible degree of support at the IAEA debates. Arguably, it is natural to think that, given the issue at stake, part of the rationale behind China's sympathy was in continuation with the reparatory measures for the 1996-7 disengagement. The public display of trust in the Iranian claims regarding the exclusively civil nature of its nuclear programme,



the opposition to the use of force and economic sanctions to resolve the nuclear crisis, Iran's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as an observer country in 2005, and the resistance to the deferral of the case to the UNSC helped China regain sympathy in Tehran. Concurrently, the leading role taken by the E3, whose premises were compatible with Beijing's call for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, allowed the PRC to develop its own approach to the question from the sideline. Arguably, this helped China balance the demands of the *friendly stakeholder* role and those of the *responsible great power*. When during his visit to Iran in 2004, Foreign Minister Li explicitly set the limits of China's support for Iran in the nuclear negotiations, making clear that the PRC would not have used its veto power at the UNSC to protect the IRI against evidence of its violation of the NPT, an Iranian newspaper wrote that Iran 'should not set any hopes [on] China in the Security Council.'<sup>463</sup> It appears plausible that, especially after 1996-7, the *friendly stakeholder* had increasingly interiorised the limits of China's support for Iran, re-modelling, at least in part, Tehran's *role* expectations. This does not mean that the inherent intra-role conflict generated by the cohabitation of the *friendly* and *stakeholder* components was solved. Instead, it was further proof that, as wisely explained by Ehteshami and colleagues, the Iranian political system was increasingly developing a highly fractioned attitude toward relations with China.<sup>464</sup>

The UNSC resolutions that sanctioned Iran placed China in an inter-role conflict potentially similar to the one that emerged a decade before and was resolved with the 1996-7 Chinese disengagement from nuclear and cruise missile cooperation with the IRI. On one side, the activity of the Security Council presented the PRC with an effective occasion to credibly enact the role of *responsible great power* determined to uphold the current non-proliferation regime in front of the most relevant audience. A subsidiary non-conflictual message was attached to that role: Beijing supported the right of non-Western, developing countries to pursue civil nuclear programmes while opposing proliferation. On the other, the Chinese involvement in the international negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme represented another major stress test for the Sino-Iranian friendship after the 1996-

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<sup>463</sup> Quoted in Garver, *China and Iran*, p.163

<sup>464</sup> See Ehteshami et al., 'Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions'

7 disengagement. To prevent the conflagration of this inter-role conflict, Beijing adopted the effective strategy of supporting the activity of the Security Council while acting from within it to delay and water down as much as possible the resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran. Concurrently, Beijing managed to balance the demands and expectations of the international community – dominated by the United States – and those of Tehran. Undoubtedly, the Ahmadinejad administration's favourable views of China helped Beijing to untie the knot. Therefore, China's balancing act was based on the use of several pre-existing ideational and material elements picked from the menus offered by its *roles*: The support for the international non-proliferation regime; the responsibility to act within the Security Council; showing Washington that Beijing could be a partner in solving shared security issues; the support of the right of developing countries – including the IRI – to develop peaceful nuclear programmes; the rejection of the use of force and the support of multilateral sanctions only as a last resort tool; the will of preserving its energy relations with Iran; assuring that Iran could perform normal commercial activities; and keeping friendly diplomatic interactions with Tehran. Ultimately, China successfully took advantage of the UNSC's activity on the Iranian nuclear programme as an opportunity to perform its role as a *responsible great power*. Yet, by combining the abovementioned elements, Beijing succeeded in not alienating Tehran, tempering the inherent inter-role with the *friendly stakeholder* role.

The inter-role conflict reached its lowest intensity after 2010, with the most apparent inflexion point emerging in late 2012. The remarkable and unprecedented coincidence between Iran and US attitudes towards a favourable conclusion of the nuclear negotiations provided China with a fertile ground to emerge from the inter-role conflict with more credibility in the performance of both the *friendly stakeholder* and the *responsible great power* roles. Until the approval of the JCPOA, Chinese management of the inter-role conflict emerging from its partnership with Iran consistently implied a trade-off that ultimately penalised Iran. One could argue that this was predictable and inherently linked to the internal tensions of the *friendly stakeholder* role and thus an implicit source of *role* resilience. Nonetheless, an implicit change in the Iranian demands toward China – evolved from the cry for anti-hegemonic solidarity of the Ahmadinejad era to the more balanced, oriented toward the opportunity of a Sino-Western competition for

the Iranian market during the Rouhani presidency – helped Beijing to more easily reconcile the contrasting tenets of its friendship with the IRI and the responsibility of great power. It was a win-win situation, and China took advantage of it.

## Conclusion

The four historical episodes presented in Chapter 5 explored the genesis, enactment, and maintenance of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations in the timespan stretching from the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the approval of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Nonetheless, Washington's withdrawal from the non-proliferation agreement in 2018 and the subsequent re-imposition of US secondary sanctions on Iran presented the PRC with new challenges and opportunities to safeguard the role of *friendly stakeholder*. I will briefly explore them in the next section before summarising the main conclusions drawn from this study, acknowledging its potential limits, and suggesting other lines of research that can be built upon the foundations set by this thesis.

### **The post-2015: China's *role* management during the *maximum pressure* campaign**

It took five years for China and Iran to sign the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement that Xi Jinping and Hassan Rouhani announced during the former's visit to Tehran in January 2016. The premises of the agreement – a new phase in Sino-Iranian relations, fuelled by the lift of UNSC and US nuclear-related sanctions, the subsequent new opportunities to access the Iranian market, and the new prospects for Tehran to become a buckle in the belt, perhaps a crucial one, on the BRI – quickly took an abrupt halt with the election of Donald Trump as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States in November 2016.

The two-year period that followed the implementation of the Iran Deal saw a sharp increase in Chinese investments in Iran.<sup>465</sup> Reasonably, the JCPOA not only opened up a sanctions-free window but also could generate a more financially and economically dynamic environment in which the Chinese companies had to compete with their European and Asian homologues to retain space in the Iranian market. Therefore, between 2016 and the end of 2017, the favourable climate following the success of the nuclear negotiations encountered China's vibrant

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<sup>465</sup> Jeremy Garlick and Radka Havlová, 'The dragon dither: assessing the cautious implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Iran', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. Vol.62. Issue 4 (2021) pp. 470-471

foreign policy under the BRI label. Yet, the election of Donald Trump tightened the pressure on both China and Iran. The Trump administration took an antagonistic posture against the PRC, whose fulcrum was the so-called Trade War that began in July 2018 with the US imposing tariffs on Chinese imported goods and the PRC retaliating in response. Yet, Trump's approach toward China did not come out of the blue. In fact, it was already under the Obama administration that the United States began reorientating its foreign policy priorities towards the great power competition with the People's Republic.<sup>466</sup> Conversely, where the newly elected Republican administration substantially reversed the policy of its Democratic predecessor, that was Iran. During his campaign, Donald Trump made clear his opposition to the JCPoA, bringing forward the possibility of a US withdrawal from the agreement during his presidency. Consistently with the electoral promise, on May 8, 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would have exited the JCPoA, concurrently launching the "highest level" of economic sanctions on Iran. The Secretary of State Mike Pompeo detailed the Trump administration's Iran strategy in a speech at the Heritage Foundation on May 21. Pompeo presented 12 demands for Iran, claiming that, to pursue its goals, the US will first,

Apply unprecedented financial pressure on the Iranian regime. The leaders in Tehran will have no doubt about our seriousness. Thanks to our colleagues at the Department of Treasury, sanctions are going back in full effect and new ones are coming. [...] This sting of sanctions will be painful. [...] These will indeed end up being the strongest sanctions in history when we are complete.<sup>467</sup>

The other members of the P5+1 group who negotiated the JCPoA reacted bitterly to the US decision to violate the agreement. The Chinese special envoy to the Middle East, Gong Xiaosheng, declared that China wanted to 'ensure the integrity and sanctity' of the Iran Deal since it was regarded as an effective nonproliferation instrument and a source of stability in the Middle East. He added that Beijing 'will carry on the normal and transparent pragmatic cooperation with Iran based on not

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<sup>466</sup> Uri Friedman, 'The New Concept Everyone in Washington is Talking About', *The Atlantic*, 6 August 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/>

<sup>467</sup> Mike Pompeo, 'After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy', *The Heritage Foundation*, 21 May 2018. <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy>

violating our international obligation.’<sup>468</sup> The message sent by China aimed to reassure the Iranian counterpart that the PRC was prepared to protect their bilateral relationship from Washington’s *maximum pressure* campaign. The first stress test to China’s promise to protect Iran from US sanctions emerged before the end of 2018: In November, the Trump administration took back into effect the sanctions targeting Iran’s banking, oil, shipping, and shipbuilding sectors. Concurrently, Washington granted a 6-month waiver to several countries, including China, to keep importing Iranian oil without being targeted by US sanctions.<sup>469</sup>

Ultimately, Beijing’s overall response to *maximum pressure* was mixed. As described by Garlick and Havlová, after peaking in 2017, China’s annual outward foreign direct investments in Iran saw a sharp decline in the following two-year period. While the reversal may partly reflect a broader change in the official guidelines issued by the PRC’s authorities regarding the overseas investments of Chinese companies, it is reasonable to assume that US withdrawal from the JCPoA had an impact on the attractiveness of the Iranian market.<sup>470</sup> In the months after the reimposition of US secondary sanctions, China-Iran trade fell significantly. Indeed, ‘Chinese exports to Iran [...] collapsed from about USD 1.2 billion in October 2018 to just USD 400 million in December 2018 – a fall of nearly 70 percent.’<sup>471</sup> In the following two-year period (Dec. 2018 – Dec. 2020), the average value of China’s monthly exports to Iran constantly remained under the symbolic threshold of USD 1 billion. Similarly, Iran’s exports to China, usually sustained by oil imports, reached two distinct peaks at over USD 2 billion in the Summer of 2018 – before *maximum pressure* reached the oil sector – and then in April 2019. Since then, the value of declared Chinese monthly imports from the IRI declined and stayed under USD 1 billion.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> ‘China Reassures Tehran on Honoring Nuclear Deal, Buying Iranian Oil’, *RFE/RL*. May 10, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-reassures-tehran-honoring-nuclear-deal-buying-iranian-oil-saudi-arabia-pledges-make-up-shortfall/29218516.html>

<sup>469</sup> ‘Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran’, *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran>

<sup>470</sup> Garlick and Havlová, ‘The dragon dithers’, pp. 470-471

<sup>471</sup> ‘Special Report: When the Sun Sets in the East. New Dynamics in China-Iran Trade Under Sanctions’, *Bourse & Bazaar*, January 2019. p.2

<sup>472</sup> For a detailed analysis of China-Iran trade data see Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, ‘China’s Declared Imports of Iranian Oil Hit a (Deceptive) New Low’, *Bourse & Bazaar*, October 23, 2019. <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2019/10/23/chinas-declared-imports-of-iranian-oil-hit->

Given Iran's petrostate economy and the historical energy relationship between the two countries, China's imports of Iranian oil represent a crucial component of Beijing's policy of defying US sanctions against Iran. In April 2019, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that Washington would not issue new waivers for states to keep importing oil from the IRI. The aim of the Trump administration was 'to bring Iran's oil exports to zero, denying the [Iranian] regime its principal source of revenue.'<sup>473</sup> Concurrently to Pompeo's announcement, Beijing's official imports of Iranian crude peaked at a monthly value of USD 1.6 billion before experiencing a sharp drop to just under USD 600 million in May 2019. All through 2020, the declared value of Chinese oil imports from Iran stabilised between USD 200 million and zero.<sup>474</sup> However, Beijing did not effectively stop its crude imports from the Islamic Republic. In fact, as emerged from OSINT reports and the analysis of the changes in oil flux from other countries, Iran has continued to sell a significant quantity of oil to China through third countries such as Malaysia.<sup>475</sup> This uninterrupted oil flux towards Beijing has worked as a lifeline for the Iranian economy facing *maximum pressure*. The Trump administration reacted to China's continuous imports of Iranian petroleum by sanctioning several Chinese entities. In July 2019, the Department of the Treasury sanctioned the state-owned oil trading company Zhuhai Zhenrong, prompting the reaction of Chinese authorities. At the following regular press conference, the spokeswoman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry slammed the US sanctions as "illegal", reaffirming that:

The Chinese side has repeatedly stressed that energy cooperation between Iran and the international community, which includes China, falls within the framework of

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[new-low-but-dont-believe-it?rq=China](https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/china-iran-trade-reports/august-2021) ; and 'China-Iran Trade Report', *Bourse & Bazaar*, August 2021. <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/china-iran-trade-reports/august-2021>

<sup>473</sup> Tom DiChristopher, 'Trump aims to drive Iran's oil exports to zero by ending sanctions waivers', *CNBC*, April 22, 2019. <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/22/trump-expected-to-end-iran-oil-waivers-try-to-drive-exports-to-zero.html>

<sup>474</sup> See 'China-Iran Trade Report'

<sup>475</sup> Lucille Greer and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, 'Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context', *Wilson Center*, September 2020. p.6

international law and is reasonable and legitimate, and must be respected and protected.<sup>476</sup>

Then, in September, Secretary Pompeo announced that Washington had imposed sanctions on a unit of the Chinese shipping giant COSCO and four other Chinese entities for transporting Iranian oil to China. Notably, the COSCO unit was then delisted at the end of January 2020, two weeks after the United States and China signed the Phase 1 trade deal, the first agreed step between the two great powers to resolve the Trade War.<sup>477</sup>

The sensible degradation in the value of China-Iran trade during the *maximum pressure* campaign and the relegation of oil imports to a grey zone suggest that China was not particularly keen to protect Iran from US sanctions. Nonetheless, Beijing has maintained a certain degree of political and economic cooperation with Tehran, which appears compatible with preserving its role as a *friendly stakeholder*. The US decision to unilaterally abandon the JCPoA offered China the opportunity to relaunch its role as *responsible stakeholder* within the international community. China opposed the Trump administration's unilateralism through constant calls to the value of multilateralism, the respect and sanctity of pacts, the rejection of unilateral sanctions deemed as illegal, and the recognition of the JCPoA as an effective nonproliferation tool. Beijing's position did not only respond to the Iranian demands, but it was also substantially consistent with the position of the other members of the Security Council. A case in point was China's position vis-à-vis the expiration of the UN arms embargo on Iran in October 2020. In response to the US attempt to extend it, the spokesperson of the PRC mission at the United Nations tweeted that:

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<sup>476</sup> 'US Sanctions on Chinese Oil Trader 'Illegal': Beijing', *Bourse & Bazaar*, July 23, 2019. <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/news-1/2019/7/23/us-sanctions-on-chinese-oil-trader-illegal-beijing?rq=china>

<sup>477</sup> Stephen Cunningham, 'U.S. Lifts Sanctions on Unit of China's Biggest Shipping Company', *Bloomberg*, January 31, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-01-31/u-s-lifts-sanctions-on-unit-of-china-s-biggest-shipping-company>



US failed to meet its obligation under Resolution 2231 by withdrawing from JCPOA. It has no right to extend an arms embargo on Iran, let alone to trigger snapback. Maintaining JCPOA is the only right way moving forward.<sup>478</sup>

Beyond the contingent issue of the arms embargo on Iran, it is evident that the argument advanced by the spokesperson drew a clear line between the US unilateral rejection of the Iran Deal and the consensus, embraced by China, that the JCPOA still was the perimeter within which the Iranian issue should be dealt with multilaterally. In other words, Trump's unilateralism and the unfolding of the Trade War with the United States gave China at least the rhetorical and political space to preserve its role vis-à-vis Iran while minimising the conflict with the expectations related to its role as *responsible great power*.

In the four years between 2017 and 2020, the trajectory of the relationship between the PRC and the United States differed from that of the past 20 years. In the post-Tiananmen period, Beijing was keen to reconstruct its relationship with Washington. At the same time, the UNSC debates on Iran tested China's international responsibility in front of the most relevant audience. Conversely, the Trade War and the emergence of the great power competition degraded the Sino-US relationship to a new low. Yet, this downward trajectory's impact on how China managed the role conflict between its friendly ties with Iran and the competition with Washington was minimal. Although Beijing kept offering Iran a considerable amount of political support and a financial lifeline through oil imports, the substantial erosion of bilateral trade unequivocally suggests that China was not keen or able to protect Iran from the impact of US sanctions.

### **Main conclusions**

Ultimately, several conclusions can be drawn from the present study. First, Sino-Iranian relations are loaded with a rich and complex ideational and historical *milieu*. John Garver already found and explained it in his foundational work. Yet, while he correctly points out that it is not the ideational milieu that ultimately defines the conduct of Sino-Iranian relations, this study suggests that it is an integral – and thus essential – component of China's role-taking and role-enactment in Sino-Iranian

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<sup>478</sup> Jonathan Fulton, 'Will China become a major arms supplier to Iran?', *Atlantic Council*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/will-china-become-a-major-arms-supplier-to-iran/>

relations. In other words, ideas and narratives are no second to material interests – although the latter are those that inform policies – in defining the interaction between the PRC and the IRI. Failing to appreciate the centrality of the ideational component means missing a crucial dimension of this continuously evolving partnership. Is the importance of the ideational dimension unique to China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations? Perhaps not. Nonetheless, Beijing's relations with Tehran have their unicity dictated by a peculiar set of historical references – at the top of which sits the always-recalled idea of two great empires whose encounters have always been peaceful –, the Islamic Republic's unique role as a balancer against the United States in the critical sub-region of the Persian Gulf, and Tehran's troubling regional behaviour. China's role as *friendly stakeholder* is the direct result of the uniqueness of Sino-Iranian relations.

One of the main takeaways of this thesis is that China-Iran relations are fundamentally defined by asymmetry. This idea is not new – Dara Conduit and Shahram Akbarzadeh have highlighted it defining Sino-Iranian relations as an archetypical example of a great power-middle power partnership –, yet, as described in Chapter 2, Sino-Iranian relations are characterised by a triple asymmetry: one derived from the uneven distribution of power; another one that results from the different positioning of the partner in China and Iran's hierarchies of interests; and the last emerging from the different value placed in the partner as a balancer against the United States. While the primary asymmetry appears fixed and substantially impossible to be levelled, it could be argued that the Islamic Republic could potentially work to downplay the other two in its favour. This, however, could only happen if Tehran changes its attitude towards the United States and its regional behaviour, and such a change is reciprocated by a progressive normalisation of Iran's position within the international community.

Third, the *friendly stakeholder* role appears significantly resilient. Such resilience can be attributed to three elements. First, it is the fact that China had the rare opportunity to develop its *role vis-à-vis* an *alter* that was emerging from a revolution as a radically new subject. While the Islamic Republic of Iran was in the process of defining itself, the PRC was learning how to deal with the newly arrived state. The two learning curves – the one of the IRI's self-definition and that of Beijing's role-taking – developed together, with China reacting, adjusting, and presenting the limits of its *role* while Tehran was facing the most-defining episodes

of its history (e.g., the Iraq-Iran War). As a result, the IRI was pushed to introject the two contrasting souls of the *friendly stakeholder* role from the very beginning of the encounter with the PRC. Second, Iran's post-1979 international isolation facilitated China's management of the role conflicts. The sentiment in Teheran toward China has always been ambivalent, with an occasional sense of betrayal at conjunctural moments. Yet, at least in public, this was ultimately covered by the acknowledgement that China was – even more than Russia and certainly less historically problematically – the only great power willing to maintain and expand economic and political relations with revolutionary Iran regardless of its problematic international behaviour. Lastly, the ideational component of the role – which can be ultimately reconducted to the idea of a *friendship* that exists and act beyond the contingency of material interests and occasional divergencies – has played a primary part in protecting the *friendly stakeholder* role from the pressure of interest-led policies. The *role* – and to an extent, the Sino-Iranian partnership itself – survives because it is equipped with a well-designed ideational escape vale.

Lastly, the study of China's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations offers a different perspective on a partnership that is often looked at through the analysis of its components without the objective of understanding the long-term dynamics that sustain it. I do not subscribe to the idea that IR theory should have predictive power. Nonetheless, studying and defining international roles and their components offers a compass that helps navigate the complexity of inter-state and international relations more easily. I hope that, despite its limitations, this study serves this purpose in the case of Sino-Iranian relations.

### **Main limitations of the study**

Indeed, a significant limitation of this study is the limited usage of primary sources. As highlighted in the introduction, the language barriers and the difficulties – if not the total impossibility – of accessing archival documentation and doing interviews in China and Iran have deprived this study of a different level of depth. In more clement times, other researchers or I could use this study as a foundation to add additional layers of complexity by interrogating more primary sources. Ultimately, if this exercise proves my study wrong, it will confirm the importance of fieldwork and archival research in IR and Security Studies. Vice versa, if my conclusions are reinforced, it will prove that a good understanding of regional and global dynamics,

the critical selection and use of secondary literature, and the definition of a valuable theoretical framework are sufficient to produce a decent study. Let's hope for the second.

Those brave enough to read this thesis have certainly raised an eyebrow discovering the notable absence of an articulated reference to Israel. The reason is twofold. On one side, during my four years of work on this study and the parallel research on China-MENA relations, I concluded that, at the regional level, China's partnership with Iran has its primary reflections and influences in the Persian Gulf sub-region. Israel, therefore, lies in the background. As apparent as it should be, this conclusion is up to challenge. On the other, despite my limited knowledge of Israeli politics, I would make the educated guess that the Sino-Iranian partnership is not the primary factor that shapes Tel Aviv's relations with Beijing. Again, this might be contested, especially by scholars who have devoted their research to Sino-Israeli relations.

Another notable absence is the UAE. Different from Israel, the Emirati are one of the main characters of China's Persian Gulf venture. Yet, my understanding is that the UAE acquired extraordinary importance in the equation of China's balancing strategy in the region during the Xi Jinping era and, more precisely, after the signature of the Sino-Emirati Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2018. For this reason, the impact of China-UAE relations as an external intervening variable on Beijing's *role* in Sino-Iranian relations is left for future research.

Lastly, on a more theoretical level, I am aware that the model I developed and adopted in this thesis might lack some complexity. Recently, Role Theory has been developed extensively to reach unprecedented levels of theoretical articulation through the methods implied (e.g., quantitative approaches) and the contamination of other social sciences (e.g., psychology). The relative simplicity of my model might not appeal to the most sophisticated role theorists. Nonetheless, I believe that my modest theoretical contribution is valuable in offering a theoretical construct that is readily applicable to many case studies, presenting a basic-yet-comprehensive model that reconnects the ideational and structural dimensions of inter-state relations through the concept of international roles.

### **Future research**

As already suggested, I believe this thesis could be the foundation for further research. The timespan analysed in this work indicates naturally that more recent historical episodes could be explored, including, for instance, the signature of the Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021, five years since its announcement in 2016, or the troubled inclusion of Tehran in the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, a study of China's *roles* in its relations with the other Persian Gulf states could provide a comparative overview of Beijing's international roles in an increasingly critical region and increase the knowledge of the PRC's Persian Gulf strategy. Looking at Sino-Iranian relations, it will be of great interest to factor in any future analysis of the impact that Iran's long-awaited admission as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will have on the progressive institutionalisation of Sino-Iranian relations – perhaps one of the most decisive challenges that the IRI's "Look to the East" policy will face in the upcoming future.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened up a new yet nebulous phase for the international community. While China has appeared more cautious and ambiguous, the IRI has quickly jumped on the Russian charade, pushed by the idea of an emerging united front of sanctioned states in the East. A lot will be written about the War in Ukraine in the coming years, and Iran's reaction will certainly generate scholarly interest. I believe that the conclusions that emerged from this study and, more broadly, the application of Role Theory could help us understand the significance, stability, limits and inherent contradictions of an Eastern front that included Russia, China, and Iran. In that sense, Russian-Iranian relations represent another exciting case study that, despite having already received top-notch scholars' attention, remains worth studying. Overall, I believe the two-dimension interactionist model could be successfully adopted in studying other international roles.

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