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China-Iran

Drew Thompson

RSiS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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SYNOPSIS

Domestic protests and the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran are threatening the survival of the ruling theocracy. Iran is a significant provider of China's oil, but that is not sufficient to entice Beijing to throw Tehran a lifeline, which risks direct confrontation with the West and provides few benefits that cannot be secured from a future regime in Tehran.

COMMENTARY

On Sunday, January 18, the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier and its battle group sailed through the Singapore Strait in the dead of night on its way to the Middle East. It is the first US aircraft carrier to deploy to the Middle East since the USS Nimitz departed for the United States last September.

Two weeks of protests in major cities across Iran have subsided following violent crackdowns that reportedly left thousands dead, prompting speculation and taunting by the son of Iran's former Shah that the regime's days were numbered. With the arrival of the Lincoln carrier strike group, President Donald Trump will have increased military options to change facts on the ground should he decide to use force against Iran, adding political pressure to an already stressed Islamic republic.

While the violent crackdowns against protestors may have bought Iran's theocratic leadership more time in office, it is facing a major existential test. China, however, does not appear to be a significant factor in the circumstances determining whether the current rulers of Iran remain in power.

In the first half of January, as the protests expanded and Trump threatened military strikes in retaliation for attacks on protestors, Beijing did not visibly flex its muscles in support of Iran's rulers, offering only neutral statements in public.

On January 15, Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a phone conversation with his Iranian counterpart, Seyed Abbas Araghchi. Offering to play a constructive role, Wang Yi reiterated China's "opposition to the use or threat of force in international relations and called for resolving differences through dialogue," and objected to "the world's return to the 'law of the jungle.'"

Beijing is not throwing Tehran a lifeline.

Granted, Iran is a significant oil supplier to China, making up about 13 per cent of China's seaborne oil imports, but oil alone is not a sufficient rationale for Beijing to accept the risks of intervening on Tehran's behalf.

Notably, Chinese buyers of discounted Iranian crude are privately owned refiners rather than the large State-owned companies that dominate China's energy market. It is doubtful that private enterprises have the political capital and influence to induce Beijing to shift China's entrenched foreign policy preferences dramatically.

While Iran provides China three times the volume of crude Venezuela does, China's Middle East suppliers, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Oman, all have excess oil-producing capacity and could replace a significant portion of Iran's exports if it were cut off. China has also been stockpiling crude in its estimated 2 billion-barrel storage facilities while prices are low, giving it a buffer against shocks. Oil is not the end-all, be-all of China's foreign policy.

China's current stance on Iran is consistent with its foreign policy principles and strategic outlook. China has previously refuted rumours that it provides Iran air defence weapons in exchange for oil, asserting that China "never exports weapons to countries engaged in warfare." China lacks incentives to accept costs or undue risks to materially stand up in defence of beleaguered partners, with the possible exception of North Korea, which is a long-time ally and a critical buffer state.

China is the essential partner to several pariah states, but none are critical to Beijing, including Iran. China's relationships are mutually beneficial, but inherently asymmetric. The benefits to sanctioned states are clear.

China can provide political legitimacy to a beleaguered regime shunned by the West, support it in the United Nations Security Council, treat its leaders respectfully and include them in multilateral fora.

Economically, China will do business with it, finance infrastructure, selectively export weapons, train its internal security forces, and sell them high-tech surveillance equipment. China can also buy its raw materials and sell finished goods in return, making Beijing an important economic partner for an isolated state that has few friends.

But Beijing also does all those things with legitimate developed and developing partners around the world. Isolated states are dependent on Beijing, but Beijing can

survive and thrive economically and diplomatically without most of its anti-Western partners.

Politically, some anti-Western states are more important to Beijing than others. The Communist Party of China has ideological allies in Cuba, North Korea, and a few other Marxist and socialist countries, such as Laos. Beijing has an interest in propping them up for political and strategic reasons to keep Beijing from being the last Communist regime on the planet. Political affinity is not as deep with a theocratic revolutionary dictatorship, making anti-Western alignment Beijing's primary common political ground with countries like Iran.

China's geoeconomic engagement strategy is based on the underlying goal of ensuring the Communist Party's security, which it achieves through self-sufficiency, diversification of partners, and reduced reliance on the major Western economies. The Dual Circulation strategy, ensconced in the 14th Five-Year Plan, is key to this strategy, and it is working. China's global south diplomacy is partly driven by this strategy to be self-sufficient while remaining adequately integrated and invested around the world to ensure global dependency on China.

China's core interests do not include propping up anti-American dictatorships around the world. The survival of Iran's current theocratic leadership has no bearing on the unification of Taiwan, China's territorial integrity, and preventing separatism in Xinjiang or Tibet, or the legitimacy of the CPC and China's economic development.

Should the Iranian government fall, due to internal pressures or external intervention, Beijing is certain to engage the successor regime whatever its ideology, ensuring that the new government does not recognise Taiwan, protects China's trade and investment interests, keeps the oil flowing and diplomatic channels open. Beijing, therefore, has little incentive to risk direct conflict with the United States or economic sanctions from Europe over the current Iranian regime's survival.

Drew Thompson is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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