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# US, Iran and China: An Emerging Strategic Triangle

What factors are helping to create a new strategic dynamic between China, Iran and the United States? According to Samir Tata, they're Beijing's ever-growing need for energy security, Tehran's desire to end crippling sanctions, and Washington's determination to keep China's global ambitions in check.

By Samir Tata for ISN

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On November 24 2013, Iran, the United States and its partners in the P5+1 were finally able to announce an [interim six-month agreement](#) aimed at resolving the impasse over Iran's nuclear energy program. Purely by coincidence, the day before this agreement was announced China unexpectedly proclaimed an [Air Defense Identification Zone \(ADIZ\)](#) covering parts of the East China Sea, most notably the air space over the disputed Senkaku/Daiyou Islands. The US [responded](#) by sending B-52 bombers through the zone but advised US commercial airlines to comply with requirements to notify Chinese authorities when flying through the ADIZ.

While fortuitous, the juxtaposition of these two announcements nevertheless highlights an emerging strategic triangle involving the US, Iran and China. Such a strategic triangle could have profound implications for stability across the Middle East and Asia.

## China's "Malacca Dilemma"

It is now well established that Beijing's overarching ambition is to reclaim its historic hegemonic status in East and Southeast Asia. Today China is unquestionably the premier Asian economic power, having displaced both Japan and the United States as the economic engine of the region. China's increasing political influence in Asia, particularly among ASEAN member-states, has followed its economic rise. However, while China has now become the dominant Asian land power, it is still far behind the US in terms of naval and air power.

Indeed, the US has undisputed control over the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that link China to its vital energy supply routes from the Persian Gulf. Virtually all Chinese imports of oil and gas from this region are carried by tankers that must sail through the Malacca Straits before entering the South China Sea. A cut-off of such oil imports, through for example a US naval blockade of the Malacca Straits, would cripple China's economy and paralyze its increasingly formidable military.

Not surprisingly, Beijing's answer is to leverage its land power and build a network of land-based oil

and gas pipelines that would effectively circumvent and neutralize a naval blockade. The key [building blocks](#) for such energy corridors are already in place. A Russia-to-China network as well as a Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-China oil and gas pipeline is now operating, with additional capacity expansions at various stages of negotiation. These pipeline networks, however, are supplementary in nature and by themselves cannot meet all of China's energy requirements. What is missing is a pipeline connection linking Iranian (and possibly Iraqi) oil and gas to the existing Kazakh and Turkmen energy pipeline network to China. Accordingly, an Iran/Iraq-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-China land-based energy corridor could resolve China's "Malacca Dilemma" and potentially negate any threat of a naval blockade. Yet, when it comes to US-Iranian tensions, the Iran-Iraq 'missing link' will not remain off the table for too long.

## **An American Checkmate of China**

While China is busy constructing a new Silk Road for black gold, the United States has a unique opportunity to leverage its powerful negotiating position as it attempts to finally resolve the nuclear impasse with Iran. The core national interest that the US seeks to protect in its negotiations is the preservation of its power to deny its adversaries access to Persian Gulf oil and gas resources. A nuclear-armed Iran poses an unacceptable challenge precisely because, in extremis, Washington would not have the option of attacking Iran to compel it to refrain from supplying oil and gas to US adversaries. An assertive China seeking to displace the US as the hegemonic power in Asia is the most likely adversary. Thus, the US can use Iran as the fulcrum for its Asian pivot to counter the growing influence of China.

The threat of a US - imposed oil embargo is a powerful deterrent against aggressive Chinese actions such as a military seizure of the Senkaku/Daioyu Islands (and certainly far more preferable than a retaliatory US military response). To be credible, such an embargo must choke off oil supplies by land as well as by sea. The most effective way of shutting off oil exports is at the source. Simply put, the US must be able to coerce or persuade Iran to suspend oil exports to China in the event of a US-China conflict.

From the US perspective, although the option of using military force to ensure Iranian compliance with an embargo on oil exports to China is available, it is highly unlikely to be exercised because the prospects for success would be far too low. Air strikes against oil fields, pipelines and other oil infrastructure would cause temporary disruption. Iran could certainly expect that China would supply it with sophisticated air defenses that would neutralize air and missile attacks, including from offshore ships. Invasion, seizure and occupation of the oil fields would be necessary to ensure their extended closure, but such a move would come at a heavy price. Again, Iran can expect to be well supplied with conventional arms by China (and most likely Russia) to sustain resistance.

As a practical matter, the US will have to rely on persuasion to ensure Iranian cooperation to shut off oil exports to China. A mutually satisfactory resolution of the nuclear issue with Iran significantly increases the likelihood of Iranian acquiescence in denying China access to Persian Gulf oil and gas resources. In return, Washington certainly has the ability to offer Iran access to trade, agriculture, science and technology, education, and finance that would more than offset the temporary loss of oil sales to and investments from China. US - Iran détente would also facilitate the normalization of Tehran's economic relations with India and Europe, which have languished as a result of the sanctions regime. Moreover, Iran needs US support (perhaps more than the US needs Iranian cooperation) to stabilize Afghanistan and Iraq. A resurgent Taliban, which continues to be closely linked to al Qaeda, seems determined to reclaim its position as the dominant power in Afghanistan. And, following the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq, an al Qaeda- Sunni tribal coalition has embarked on an insurgency that seeks to carve out an autonomous region in western Iraq. Without continuing US military support in terms of equipment and supplies, the current Afghan and Iraqi governments, which

have close relations with Iran, may be unable to combat these threats. It is certainly not in Iran's interest to have unstable regimes on its eastern and western borders, particularly if those regimes are dominated by radical Sunni fundamentalists who are hostile to a Shia Iran. However, Tehran cannot provide comparable military support.

### **Iran's Unique Geostrategic Advantage**

Iran, by virtue of its location and petroleum resources, holds the key to China's energy security. It is the only Persian Gulf oil exporter that can provide a land based oil and gas pipeline connection to China. Iran has the world's third largest oil reserves and second largest natural gas reserves. And while Iran is central to China's energy security, China as Iran's largest energy customer is critical to Iran's economic security. Iranian energy pipelines can be extended to connect to the existing Chinese pipeline network carrying oil and gas from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. From Tehran's perspective, an additional benefit of such a pipeline connection is that it would incentivize China to provide it with sophisticated military equipment needed to protect Iranian oil fields and pipelines. Given the obvious mutual benefits, and the likelihood of increasing US - China tensions, an Iran-China energy pipeline connection will become a reality sooner rather than later.

However, in order to become a reliable exporter of oil and gas, Iran must be able to develop renewable nuclear power to meet its growing domestic needs for electricity. Adding further urgency is the looming crisis in Iran's [agricultural sector](#). A combination of inefficient water management, increasing salinity in farmland, drought, and misguided agricultural pricing policies has caused [dramatic decreases](#) in agricultural production. For example, President Rouhani has announced that Iran will have to import 70 percent of its [wheat requirement](#) in 2014. The United States is the most obvious source for such wheat (as well as water management systems and technology) pending a turnaround in Iranian agriculture. From Iran's perspective, the danger of economic collapse is far more imminent than the danger of an American attack. Accordingly, it is imperative that Iran resolves US concerns over a potential nuclear weapons program. By astute triangulation between the US and China, Iran can reduce the possibility of military attack while increasing its economic security. Détente rather than confrontation is in Iran's benefit.

Thus, China's growing need for energy security, Washington's desire to preserve its ability to credibly threaten Beijing, and Iran's quest for economic security are the three interlocking legs of an emerging strategic triangle that bodes well for peace and stability in the Middle East and Asia. Resolving the US-Iran nuclear impasse will be a major step in the birth of this new security paradigm.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Iran: US Concerns and Policy Responses](#)

[The End of Non-Interference?](#)

[Iran Turns to China, Barter to Survive Sanctions](#)

[The Iran Nuclear Issue](#)

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