

# FMSO's Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project

*Tracking Russian and Chinese military influence in states around the world*

## Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Iran

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## OVERVIEW OF FMSO'S M-DIME RESEARCH PROJECT

The Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project is a dynamic effort from researchers at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). Its goal is to provide Army leaders with a clear, comparative understanding of how China and Russia employ instruments of national power to obtain military influence around the world. The M-DIME framework is derived from the "DIME" concept, which classes instruments of national power into four types: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. Based on this concept, the M-DIME framework gives more narrow attention to the instruments that China and Russia employ to gain military influence in third-party countries.

The M-DIME framework's purpose is to track and analyze the military influence of "Benefactor" countries (i.e. China and Russia) in select "Recipient" countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and South-east Asia. Benefactor countries are assumed to engage in activities that result in them having increased military influence in Recipient countries to gain leverage over global rivals, competitors, and adversaries; for China and Russia, this means the United States. Within this framework, "military influence" is defined as the ability of a Benefactor country to shape or alter the attitudes, behaviors, and capabilities of actors within—and entities associated with—the armed forces of Recipient countries.

**The M-DIME framework identifies 12 distinct instruments of national power employed by Benefactor countries to gain military influence in Recipient countries, three for each of the DIME categories. They are as follows:**

### DIPLOMATIC INSTRUMENTS

- D1 Defense-Related Diplomacy
- D2 International Military Education and Training
- D3 Soft Power Activities

### INFORMATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

- I1 Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment
- I2 Information/Communications Technology Support
- I3 Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications

### MILITARY INSTRUMENTS

- M1 Formal Bilateral Military Engagements
- M2 Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements
- M3 Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

### ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS

- E1 Arms Transfers
- E2 Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements
- E3 Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors

M-DIME analysis is based on qualitative assessments of Benefactor influence in Recipient countries along each of the 12 M-DIME instruments of influence. These assessments are made for the Benefactor's **Current Influence** (assessed as **Very High, High, Medium, Low, Very Low, or Unobserved**) and **Projected Influence** (assessed as **Increasing, Steady, Decreasing, or Unknown**). Current assessments are made based on activities from 2012 to the present, while future assessments are three-year forecasts.

The bulk of activities considered in the M-DIME Research Project involve members of the armed forces or defense sector personnel in both Benefactor and Recipient countries. Such activities include formal and informal military-to-military diplomacy, security cooperation engagements, and arms transfers. However, the M-DIME Research Project also tracks and analyzes Chinese and Russian activities that employ non-military instruments of influence but ultimately bear on the decision-making and capabilities of the Recipient country's armed forces. Such activities include Chinese and Russian collaboration with Benefactor states in media, communications technology, and strategic sectors.

The M-DIME Research Project's findings are derived from open-source research. Each M-DIME product is produced with the collaboration of analysts from across FMSO, frequently with the assistance of non-Department of Defense subject matter experts coming from academia, think tanks, and the private sector. Given its basis in open-source research, the M-DIME Research Project has an inherent limitation. It cannot track Chinese and Russian military influence activities that are deliberately kept secret. Consequently, assessments of Chinese and Russian influence based on instruments for which secrecy is important or where information would typically be classified by the Benefactor or Recipient countries—for instance, military-technology sharing or intelligence collaboration—are acknowledged to be made with low confidence. In certain cases, assessments are not made where open-source data is considered inconclusive.

In sum, the M-DIME Research Project is a tool for U.S. Army and U.S. Government personnel to better understand the instruments of national power employed by China and Russia to gain global military influence and the impact these activities have on U.S. national security interests. Over time, FMSO will expand the body of research and assessments based on this framework, increasing its comparative value across Benefactor and Recipient countries.


















## KEY ASSESSMENTS

**China's current M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as High.** Some of the most important instruments that China currently uses to gain military influence in Iran include:

- 
**Defense-Related Diplomacy (D1).** China's and Iran's respective foreign ministers, defense ministers, and military personnel meet regularly. Significant bilateral agreements have been signed during high-level visits in recent years and have paved the way for extensive engagement in the military, informational, and economic spheres.
- 
**Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications (I3).** Iran has been granted full access to China's indigenous satellite navigation system, Beidou, for military purposes. Use of the same navigation system for military purposes entails deeper engagement and collaboration in military communications and guidance systems.
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**Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements (E2).** There are strong indications that, unofficially at least, Chinese companies and individuals share military technology with Iran. Considering the U.S. sanctions on China-based companies and the fact that major arms manufacturers from China have established themselves in Tehran, it is likely that there is an ongoing, informal transfer of arms and military technology from China to Iran.

**China's projected M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as Increasing over the next three years.** Some of the most important instruments that China is projected to use to gain military influence in Iran include:

- 
**Soft Power Activities (D3) and Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors (E3).** China is steadily cultivating links in strategically significant Iranian port cities along the Strait of Hormuz. While such engagements are diplomatic and economic, they may provide China with greater military access in the future given the increasingly security-oriented bilateral relationship.
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**Formal Bilateral Military Engagements (M1).** When Chinese President Xi Jinping and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met in Beijing in 2023, they pledged to expand joint military exercises and training, as well as strengthen strategic communication between their respective defense sectors. Although China and Iran have not conducted bilateral drills for several years, these recent pledges increase the likelihood of bilateral military engagements occurring in the future.

| DIPLOMATIC / INFORMATION  |           |   | MILITARY / ECONOMIC  |           |  |
|---|-----------|---|--|-----------|--|
|  | <b>D1</b> | Defense-Related Diplomacy                           |   | <b>M1</b> | Formal Bilateral Military Engagements              |
|  | <b>D2</b> | International Military Education and Training       |   | <b>M2</b> | Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements  |
|  | <b>D3</b> | Soft Power Activities                               |   | <b>M3</b> | Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements              |
|  | <b>I1</b> | Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment   |   | <b>E1</b> | Arms Transfers                                     |
|  | <b>I2</b> | Information/Communications Technology Support       |   | <b>E2</b> | Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements    |
|  | <b>I3</b> | Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications |   | <b>E3</b> | Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors |
| CURRENT DEGREE OF INFLUENCE   |           |   | PROJECTED FUTURE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE   |           |  |
| Very High   | High      | Medium  | Low  | Very Low  | None/Unobserved                                    |
|   |           |   | Increasing    Steady    Decreasing  |           |  |

## INTRODUCTION TO CHINA-IRAN MILITARY RELATIONS

Chinese and Iranian officials often underscore a shared heritage of their nations. They highlight their status as the inheritors of illustrious and ancient civilizations, as well as their perceptions of being the victims of historical grievances inflicted by Western powers.<sup>1</sup> China and Iran’s military relationship began in the mid-1930s, but it flourished during the 1980s after the end of both states’ respective revolutionary periods. Throughout the Iran-Iraq War, China managed to maintain relationships with both sides, establishing a successful foundation for cultivating ties with each country in the years that followed. In 1985 alone, China sold Iran \$1.6 billion worth of fighters, tanks, heavy artillery, multiple rocket launchers, and surface-to-air-missiles.<sup>2</sup> For a time, China assisted in the development of Iran’s missile and nuclear program. However, it ended official support in the 1990s after growing international scrutiny of Iran and Chinese leaders’ growing inclination to foster a close relationship with the United States. Despite officially ceasing engagement, it appears that both state-owned and non-state-owned enterprises, as well as Chinese nationals, continued their unofficial involvement in Iran’s missile industry while Beijing turned a blind eye.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2014, China and Iran’s official military relationship has experienced renewed growth, with an uptick in high-ranking military personnel visits, bilateral naval exercises, and multilateral exercises with Russia. In 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif, signed the “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and People’s Republic of China,” a 25-year program to deepen bilateral economic, military, and cybersecurity cooperation.<sup>4</sup> A further 20 collaboration documents were signed during Raisi’s visit to Beijing in February 2023.<sup>5</sup> During that visit, Xi and Raisi pledged their “unswerving” commitment to “deepening and upgrading the Iran-China comprehensive strategic partnership.”<sup>6</sup> While the specific contents of these agreements have not been made public, it is likely that they had military and security clauses given the pattern of increasing strategic cooperation between the two nations. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy gives priority to efforts to “deter and counter Iran’s destabilizing activities”<sup>7</sup> and recognizes that China has “both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”<sup>8</sup>

### IRAN AT A GLANCE

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Capital</b>                         | Tehran  |
| <b>Population</b>                      | 87,590,873 (2023 estimate) <sup>9</sup>   |
| <b>GDP per Capita</b>                  | \$15,000 (2021 estimate) <sup>10</sup>  |
| <b>Head of Government</b>              | President Ebrahim Raisi <sup>11</sup>   |
| <b>Head of State</b>                   | Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini Khamenei <sup>12</sup>   |
| <b>Minister of Defense</b>             | Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Gharaei Ashtiani <sup>13</sup>  |
| <b>Chief of General Staff</b>          | Major General Mohammad Bagheri <sup>14</sup>  |
| <b>Military Expenditure (total)</b>    | \$6.842 billion (2022 estimate) <sup>15</sup>   |
| <b>Military Expenditure (% of GDP)</b> | 2.5% (2022 estimate) <sup>16</sup>  |
| <b>Armed Service Branches</b>          | <b>Islamic Republic of Iran Army (Artesh):</b> Ground Forces, Navy (includes marines), Air Force, Air Defense Forces<br><b>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or Sepah):</b> Ground Forces, Navy (includes marines), Aerospace Force (controls strategic missile force), Qods Force (a.k.a. Quds Force; special operations), Cyber Electronic Command, Basij Paramilitary Forces <sup>17</sup> |
| <b>Active Armed Forces Personnel</b>   | 550,000-600,000 <sup>18</sup>   |



## D - Diplomatic Influence Instruments

Iran and China maintain direct, high-level military and diplomatic contact. These ties have grown increasingly close and structured since 2014, with multiple reciprocal visits taking place each year between the countries' respective foreign ministers, defense ministers, and military personnel, as well as a visit by Xi to Tehran in 2016 and Raisi to Beijing in 2023.



### D1 - Defense-Related Diplomacy

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **At least eight meetings between Iranian and Chinese defense ministers and other high-ranking military personnel have taken place in the past nine years, suggesting close and ongoing contact between the countries' militaries.**
  - » In April 2022, Raisi hosted Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in Tehran. Wei also met his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, and the Iranian Chief of Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri.<sup>19</sup> Wei expressed the intention to “push the relationship between the two militaries to a higher level.”<sup>20</sup>
  - » In September 2019, Bagheri met General Li Zuocheng, the Chief of China's Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission (CMC), in Beijing<sup>21</sup> and General Xu Qiliang, the CMC's Vice Chairman.<sup>22</sup> During the visit, he toured a Chinese naval base in Shanghai.<sup>23</sup> In December 2019, Lieutenant General Shao Yuanming, Deputy Chief of the CMC's Joint Staff Department, visited Tehran and met Bagheri.<sup>24</sup>
- **Official visits often result in fresh bilateral agreements that strengthen formal relations between the two states.**
  - » Seventeen agreements were signed when Xi visited Tehran in January 2016.<sup>25</sup> The “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and People's Republic of China,” was signed during Wang's visit to Tehran in March 2021<sup>26</sup> and implemented in January 2022.<sup>27</sup> A further 20 cooperation agreements were signed when Raisi visited Beijing in February 2023.<sup>28</sup>
- **The outcomes of official meetings are increasingly ambitious and systematized, suggesting that bilateral security cooperation will likely also increase over the next three years.**
  - » In February 2023, Xi and Raisi pledged to strengthen the cooperation between Iran and China's military forces by expanding joint military exercises and training, as well as deepening strategic communication between defense sectors.<sup>29</sup>



### D2 - International Military Education and Training

**Current Influence: Unobserved**

**Projected Influence: Unknown**

- **There is no publicly available information about ongoing International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs between China and Iran.**
- **However, it is likely that IMET efforts do occur.**
  - » The allusion to increasing joint personnel training during the meeting between Xi and Raisi in February 2023 suggests that IMET programs exist and may increase in the future.<sup>30</sup>
- **Because of the lack of observed activities, projected Chinese influence via this instrument is unknown.**



### D3 - Soft Power Activities

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **China and Iran have conducted military port visits, but there is no open-source information suggesting that these have continued to occur since 2014.**
  - » In March 2013, the Iranian destroyer Sabalan and the helicopter carrier *Kharg* visited Zhangjiagang port, Jiangsu Province.<sup>31</sup> In September 2014, two People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels (destroyer *Changchun* and frigate *Changzhou*) conducted a five-day port visit at Bandar Abbas. Meetings were held between PLAN officers and Iranian Naval Coastal Defense Area Command and Southern Fleet commanders, and there were social events involving Iranian and Chinese sailors.<sup>32</sup>
- **China continues to direct attention towards strategically important coastal regions in Iran through diplomatic means. Iran has welcomed these overtures, suggesting that Chinese influence via this instrument will likely increase over the next three years.**
  - » In December 2022, China's first consulate in Iran opened in Bandar Abbas, which is situated on the strategically significant Strait of Hormuz.<sup>33</sup>

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved

# I – Informational Influence Instruments

China’s tendency to seek influence via informational instruments in Iran involves media cooperation and building 5G network infrastructure. Increasingly, Sino-Iranian information exchanges have military significance related to space and cyber cooperation.



## I1 - Cultural and Media Outreach, Collaboration, and Alignment

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Steady**

- **Both Iran and China have closely aligned media coverage of controversial topics within each other’s country, and there has been considerable engagement by officials through state television channels in both countries.**
  - » Iranian media outlets follow Chinese stances on domestic political issues, such as China’s Xinjiang policies. China reciprocates—for instance during its coverage of Iran’s 2022 protests.<sup>34</sup>
  - » In 2023, Raisi gave a sit-down interview to China Global Television Network, a state-run foreign-language news channel based in Beijing.<sup>35</sup> China’s Ambassador to Iran, Chang Hua, frequently appears on Iran’s official Islamic Republic News Agency<sup>36</sup> and publishes online op-eds.<sup>37</sup>
- **China has engaged in educational outreach in Iran.**
  - » There are two Confucius Institutes in Iran: at the University of Tehran (opened in October 2007) and at the University of Mazandaran (opened in November 2016).<sup>38</sup> However, this is a comparatively small number of Confucius Institutes given that Pakistan has five.<sup>39</sup>
- **There have been no recent major developments that indicate that Chinese influence via this instrument will substantially increase or decrease over the next three years.**



## I2 - Influence in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Support

**Current Influence: Very High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **China and Iran have established a strong collaborative relationship in the ICT sector through high-level diplomatic initiatives.**
  - » In 2016, Iranian Minister of Communications and Information Technology Mahmoud Vaezi and Chinese Minister of Industry and Information Miao Wei signed an agreement to expand cooperation in research and development of ICT infrastructure and satellites.<sup>40</sup>
- **China has been directly involved in developing Iran’s 5G network infrastructure.**
  - » China appears to have developed extensive 5G and LTE networks in Iran. Two projects with different Iranian companies cost approximately \$220 million and \$250 million, respectively.<sup>41</sup>
- **China and Iran closely collaborate in satellite-tracking.**
  - » China and Iran are members of the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, which oversees a space surveillance project called the Asia-Pacific Ground-Based Optical Space Object Observation System.<sup>42</sup> As part of the project, China provided Iran, Pakistan, and Peru with 15-cm telescopes to track objects orbiting in Low Earth Orbit (altitude of 160-2000 km) and Geostationary Equatorial Orbit (altitude of 35786 km). The data gathered is sent to Beijing’s Academy of Science’s National Astronomical Observatory of China.<sup>43</sup>
- **Iran and China have expressed the importance of deepening their ICT collaboration to challenge U.S. dominance, sparking speculation that the two countries are engaged in a concerted counter-U.S. cyberspace effort. Chinese influence via this instrument is likely to increase over the next three years.**
  - » In 2019, Iranian Minister of Communications and Information Technology Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi met with China’s Ambassador to Iran, Chang Hua, and named China as “a significant partner of Iran in the digital economy,” especially given American “unilateralism in the IT sector.”<sup>44</sup>



## I3 - Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran is the only country besides Pakistan that has full access to China’s indigenous satellite navigation system, Beidou.**
  - » In October 2015, Iranian defense electronics company, Salran, signed an agreement with Chinese defense companies to start using Beidou satellite positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) equipment on Iranian missiles and UAVs to improve their targeting capabilities.<sup>45</sup>
  - » In 2021, Iran was granted full access to China’s Beidou satellite system for military purposes.<sup>46</sup>
- **Given that the Iranian and Chinese militaries now use the same navigation system, engagement and collaboration via this instrument of Chinese influence are highly likely to increase over the next three years.**

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved



# M - Military Influence Instruments

Since 2014, military cooperation between China and Iran has progressively strengthened. Initially, this involved bilateral exercises, followed by the inclusion of Russia in multilateral exercises, which further enhanced their engagement. During Raisi's state visit to China in February 2023, both he and Xi pledged to escalate the frequency of joint military exercises, signaling a further deepening of their military collaboration.



## M1: Formal Bilateral Military Engagements

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **China and Iran have engaged in two joint exercises, although there have not been any in the past five years.**
  - » In 2014, China and Iran conducted basic search and rescue and anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden<sup>47</sup> and in 2017, the PLAN and Iranian Navy conducted four days of drills in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>48</sup>
- **Although China and Iran have not conducted bilateral drills for several years, Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023 suggested that this may be changing.**
  - » Xi and Raisi discussed strengthening the cooperation between Iran's and China's military forces by expanding joint military exercises and training, as well as strengthening strategic communication between defense sectors.<sup>49</sup>
- **As a result of the above, Chinese influence via this instrument is likely to increase over the next three years.**



## M2: Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Recent military engagement between Iran and China tends to be multilateral and includes Russia.**
  - » Combined naval exercises between Iran, China, and Russia have taken place in December 2019,<sup>50</sup> January 2021,<sup>51</sup> and March 2023.<sup>52</sup> At a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defense Ministers meeting in April 2023, Ashtiani described the drills as "[demonstrating] that the three countries oppose the hegemonic views of the West and the United States."<sup>53</sup>
- **These exercises, part of the so-called "Marine Security Belt," are set to take place annually. As a result, multilateral military engagements between China, Iran, and Russia will likely continue to occur on a regular basis, thus indicating increased Chinese influence via this tool over the next three years.**



## M3: Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

**Current Influence: Medium**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **There is only one publicly known security cooperation agreement between China and Iran.**
  - » Signed between Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan and then Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan in November 2016, it pledged closer military cooperation, including in military training and counterterrorism operations, as well as holding further joint military exercises.<sup>54</sup>
- **Given evidence of the types of collaboration between Iran and China in recent years, it is likely that the cooperation agreements signed include defense clauses.**
  - » Cooperation agreements with possible defense or security clauses include the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and People's Republic of China," signed in March 2021,<sup>55</sup> and the 20 cooperation pacts signed in February 2023 during Raisi's visit to China.<sup>56</sup>
- **Given Iran's full membership in the SCO, which it attained in September 2022 and was ratified in July 2023,<sup>57</sup> closer cooperative and strategic ties between Tehran and Beijing are likely to increase over the next three years,**
  - » At the SCO Defense Ministers meeting in April 2023, Ashtiani argued in favor of closer military relations between SCO members, the establishment of the "Shanghai Maritime Security Belt," a new maritime military zone, and stated that "SCO member states share the responsibility for designing a new world order."<sup>58</sup>



# E – Economic Influence Instruments

Iran is strategically dependent on trade with China, while the reverse is not the case. Obtaining credible open-source information about official arms trade and military technology sharing between China and Iran proves challenging. There are, however, indications that unofficial engagement occurs in the economic sphere: the presence of China’s major state-owned enterprises specializing in military manufacturing in Iran, the indictment of Chinese individuals involved in arms trafficking to Iran, and ongoing sanctions imposed by the United States on Chinese companies.



## E1: Arms Transfers

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Steady**

- **Officially, at least, China ceased exporting arms to Iran after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was reached in 2015. However, it is likely that Chinese nationals have remained active participants in schemes to transfer dual-use technology and arms to Iran, as well as serve as a workaround for China’s official export of arms to Iran.**
  - » Officially, between 2010 and 2019, exports to Iran accounted for 19 percent of its arms exports to the Middle East, but just 1 percent of its global arms exports.<sup>59</sup>
  - » According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s arms trade register, the official supply of arms from China to Iran ceased after 2015. Pre-2015, the arms supplied by China were: anti-ship missiles, armored personnel carriers, and portable surface-to-air missiles.
  - » However, several individuals have been sanctioned and indicted by the United States for transferring arms from China to Iran, including Karl Lee/Li Fangwei,<sup>60</sup> Cheng Sihai,<sup>61</sup> Ghobad Ghasempour, and Yi Xiong.<sup>62</sup>
  - » Additionally, China is not part of the Wassenaar Arrangement, a voluntary export control regime that aims to promote transparency and greater responsibility in the transfers of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies.<sup>63</sup> As a result, it is not bound by international legal convention to crack down on official or unofficial arms sales with Iran.
- **Unlike other countries in the region, Iran does not buy Chinese UAVs. This is likely because Iran has a strong, indigenous UAV industry, not because China is unwilling to sell it UAVs.<sup>64</sup>**
  - » China is the world’s leading exporter of combat drones<sup>65</sup> and has been actively exporting UAVs to various countries in the Middle East and South Asia, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Pakistan. There is no evidence that it does the same with Iran.
- **Given that the UN arms embargo on Iran was lifted in 2020, it is possible that China will eventually resume official arms sales to Iran, leading to a steady degree of Chinese influence via this instrument over the next three years.**
  - » China and Russia voted against a U.S.-proposed Security Council resolution to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran.<sup>66</sup>



## E2: Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Much of China’s military technology sharing with Iran predates 2012; however, the same designs are still being used by Iran in contemporary arms production. Moreover, it is likely that such cooperation has persisted since 2012 given U.S. sanctions on China-based companies over their involvement in Iran’s development of missiles.<sup>67</sup>**
  - » Many Iranian missile series draw on Chinese designs and technology (e.g. the short-range Oghab and Nazeat, and the long-range Shahab 3,<sup>68</sup> which was successfully tested in 2016).<sup>69</sup> The Nasr anti-ship cruise missile is nearly identical to the Chinese C-704, and it has been reported that China helped Iran establish a manufacturing plant for the Nasr in 2010.<sup>70</sup>
- **China’s main arms manufacturers all have a presence in Tehran, suggesting significant arms and military technology transfer between China and Iran.**
  - » The Aviation Industry Corporation of China and China Electronics Technology Group Corporation have offices in Tehran<sup>71</sup> and have been involved in infrastructure projects in Iran.<sup>72</sup> China South Industries Group Corporation has a manufacturing facility in Tehran.<sup>73</sup>
  - » China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) was sanctioned by the United States in the 2000s for transferring proliferation technology to Iran,<sup>74</sup> and it remains on many U.S. states’ scrutinized lists over its dealings with Iran.<sup>75</sup> In 2017, NORINCO built a petrochemical plant in Iran worth \$1.5 billion,<sup>76</sup> and, in 2018, it set up a subsidiary in Iran for “new energy projects.”<sup>77</sup>

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved



- **While China does not directly export finished product UAVs to Iran, it plays a significant role in facilitating their technological development and directly supplying drone components.**
  - » In March 2023, the United States sanctioned five Chinese firms for supplying Iran with drone parts, which were based in Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Guilin, and Hong Kong.<sup>78</sup>
  - » The Shahed-136 is manufactured in Iran; however, it contains an MD550 engine, which is produced by the Chinese company Beijing MicroPilot Flight Control systems. The Chinese engine, in turn, is based on the Limbach L550e, which is designed by a German aircraft company. This suggests that China is instrumental in distributing Western technology to Iran, either by producing copied engines in China and exporting them to Iran or selling the engine designs to Iran.<sup>79</sup>
- **Even during the period of UN-imposed sanctions on Iran, military technology sharing between Beijing and Tehran likely persisted. With international sanctions now lifted, the likelihood of official activity occurring alongside ongoing unofficial activity has increased. Iran’s clear dependence on Chinese military technology and components, coupled with the heightened presence of Chinese arms manufacturers in Tehran, suggests that Chinese influence via this instrument will increase over the next three years.**



**E3: Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors**

**Current Influence: High**

**Projected Influence: Increasing**

- **Iran is strategically dependent on economic trade with China, although the reverse is not the case.**
  - » China has been Iran’s largest trading partner for 10 consecutive years from 2012-2022,<sup>80</sup> and Iran’s ongoing trade with China has shielded it from U.S.-imposed sanctions.<sup>81</sup>
  - » China’s top exports to Iran are mainly auto-industry related,<sup>82</sup> while Iran’s top exports to China are oil, raw aluminum, refined copper, and iron ore.<sup>83</sup>
- **Iran has probably diverted certain trade with China for military purposes, although it is unclear whether this has been with China’s consent.**
  - » China Nonferrous Metal Industry’s Foreign Engineering and Construction Co. (NFC), a state-owned enterprise, has been actively involved in the development of Iran’s aluminum mining industry. Documents related to NFC’s creation of an aluminum refinery in Iran, along with comments from an Iranian official, suggest that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has used the China-owned refinery to produce aluminum powder in support of its missile program.<sup>84</sup>
  - » In 2019, Chinese firms were sanctioned by the United States for supplying Iran’s Centrifuge Technology Company with aluminum products used in the manufacture of centrifuges.<sup>85</sup>
- **China also seems to be developing economic relationships with Iran for strategic ends. In particular, China’s economic activity in several Iranian ports of strategic importance may be intended to provide China with greater military access in the future.**
  - » China has developed a significant presence in strategically located ports on the Strait of Hormuz, at Jask, Bandar Abbas, and Chabahar.<sup>86</sup> While China’s engagement in these ports is largely diplomatic and economic in nature, the increasing security orientation of bilateral relations may add a military component to China’s engagement in Iran’s Persian Gulf ports.
- **Iran and China’s economic trade is likely to heavily feature strategic sectors in the future, given recent bilateral agreements. As such, Chinese influence via this instrument is likely to increase over the next three years.**
  - » In a draft of the 25-year “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and People’s Republic of China,” obtained by Western media, China reportedly pledged to invest \$400 billion in Iran’s economy in exchange for a steady and heavily discounted supply of oil.<sup>87</sup>
  - » An oil industry publication indicated that the agreement included a \$280 billion investment by China in the development of Iran’s oil, gas, and petrochemical sectors.<sup>88</sup>



## CONCLUSIONS

### Current Influence

**China's current influence in Iran is assessed as High. Beijing exerts significant military influence in Iran through all four types of M-DIME influence instruments—Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic.** From the U.S. perspective, a particularly concerning development in Iran-China relations is the trend toward the establishment of a military and security bloc that opposes American interests and those of its allies. Iranian officials, including Defense Minister Ashtiani, have openly expressed their aspiration to build a network of partners to “reshape...[the] international order.”<sup>89</sup> While Chinese officials may be more cautious in their public statements, the actions of both countries suggest that Iran's ambitions are realistic. China has employed all three economic instruments to gain military influence in Iran, with its activities in Technology-Sharing and Joint Production Agreements (E2) being particularly noteworthy. Considering the U.S. sanctions on China-based companies and the fact that major arms manufacturers from China have established themselves in Tehran, there is a high probability that there is an ongoing, informal transfer of arms and military technology from China to Iran. Threats to U.S. interests also stem from Tehran's adoption of China's Beidou navigation system for military purposes (I3) and the regular multilateral military exercises conducted among China, Iran, and Russia through the “Maritime Security Belt” (M2).

### Projected Influence

**China's projected M-DIME influence in Iran is assessed as likely Increasing over the next three years. The nature of Chinese influence in Iran is evolving toward a stronger emphasis on military and security influence instruments, undermining U.S. interests across all four elements of national power—Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic.** China's steady cultivation of links in strategically significant Iranian port cities along the Strait of Hormuz using economic (E3) and diplomatic (D3) instruments could enable it to ultimately gain a greater military foothold in the region, which has significant implications for U.S. naval interests in the Persian Gulf. Other indications that strategic cooperation between China and Iran will increase include Raisi's pledge to increase joint military exercises and training, as well as strengthen strategic communication between their respective defense sectors (M1); China and Iran's joint commitment to enhance their ICT collaboration (I2); and Tehran's expressed desire for the SCO to establish a multilateral military network of like-minded partners (M3). Increasingly structured and strategic Sino-Iranian relations present the United States with various conventional and unconventional military challenges, while amplifying the complexity of Middle Eastern regional security and the global security environment more broadly.



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