

# Western media steps up pressure on China over Iran

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As US pressure escalates against Iran over its nuclear programs, a distinct anti-China undercurrent has appeared in the American and international media over Beijing's resistance to backing punitive new sanctions against Tehran in the event of a breakdown in talks.

A number of articles have appeared highlighting China's substantial investments in and trade with Iran. On September 23, the British-based *Financial Times* reported that Chinese companies have begun selling petrol to Iran as other exporters including BP and Reliance of India were cutting back. The article offered little in the way of evidence, claiming that state-owned Chinese companies were operating through intermediaries and now accounted for one third of Iran's gasoline imports.

Just days later President Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy melodramatically revealed news of a "secret" Iranian uranium enrichment plant at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh and threatened a new round of sanctions. Among the measures being discussed is a crippling ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, which has huge oil reserves but limited refinery capacity.

The *New York Times* took up the same theme as the *Financial Times* in an article on September 30 entitled "China's ties with Iran may snag sanctions". The newspaper noted that China relies on Iran for 15 percent of its imported oil, has committed to \$120 billion of energy deals and investment over the past five years, and in return has sold growing volumes of Chinese goods to Iran. "Iran has loaded up on imported Chinese machine tools, factory equipment, locomotives and other heavy goods, building China into one of its largest trading partners," it declared.

The article directly underscored divergent US and Chinese interests in Iran. "The United States has almost no financial ties with Iran, regards its government as a threat to global stability and worries that a rising Tehran could threaten American alliances and energy agreements in the Gulf," it declared. "In

contrast, China's economic links to Tehran are growing rapidly, and it sees Iran not as a threat but as a potential ally. Nor would the Chinese be distressed, the reasoning goes, should a nuclear-armed Iran sap American influence in the region and drain the Pentagon's resources in more Middle East manoeuvring."

At present, the tone of such articles is still quite mild compared to the vitriol that appeared in late 2002 and early 2003 when France and Germany refused to fall in behind the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. But it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see in the *New York Times's* commentary potential denunciations of Beijing for aiding a rogue state, endangering US troops, and threatening regional and global stability. The aim at this stage is to pressure China, which has backed previous limited UN sanctions, to line up with the US campaign.

The media exposure of China's widely known economic interests in Iran is just as hypocritical as were Washington's rhetorical attacks on "Old Europe" and Russia for their oil interests in Iraq. No one is writing about the fact that Japan, not China, is actually the largest importer of Iranian oil or that the European Union is still Iran's largest trading partner. Nor are Russia's close connections with Iran, including its nuclear program, the subject of discussion. In return for Obama's modification of the US missile system and scrapping of bases in Eastern Europe, Russia has strongly hinted that it might be prepared to back tough sanctions against Iran.

No mention is made of the economic motivations of those pushing for confrontation with Iran. Academic Michael Bauer from the University of Munich told Deutsche Welle that historically Germany had been Iran's most important trade partner, but now confronted a dilemma. Berlin, he explained, "hopes that there'll be a breakthrough in relations with Iran so that sanctions won't be an issue any more. And on the other hand, German industry fears that, when sanctions are lifted, they'll be far behind China and Russia to get out of the starting blocks."

The European powers were also concerned about Russia's plan to create a natural gas cartel with Iran and Qatar, along the lines of OPEC, that would control 60 percent of the world's gas reserves. When announced last October, the European Union immediately opposed the plan. The EU is dependent on Russia for half of its gas imports, which has been exploited by Moscow in recent years to exert pressure on Europe by threatening to cut off supplies.

European efforts to lessen dependence on Russian energy supplies have brought it into closer alignment with the US. These common interests are behind European participation in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, the various "colour revolutions" engineered by Washington in former Soviet republics, and now Iran, which as well as its own huge reserves is situated adjacent to the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In the case of the US, it is precisely the lack of economic ties that is driving its confrontation with Iran. One only has to ask the question: what would happen if relations with Iran were normalised and sanctions lifted? Immediately there would be a scramble for economic position and political influence in Tehran by all the major powers. The US, which has no diplomatic relations with and virtually no trade and investment in Iran, would be starting with a major disadvantage. Confrontation and sanctions, on the other hand, serve to undermine the position of US rivals.

Former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advised Obama during his election campaign, highlighted the broad strategic issues at stake for the US in his 1996 book, *The Grand Chessboard*. "Potentially, the most dangerous scenario [for the US] would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an 'anti-hegemonic' coalition united not by ideology but by complementary grievances. It would be reminiscent in scale and scope of the challenge posed by the Sino-Soviet bloc, though this time China would likely be the leader and Russia the follower. Averting this contingency, however remote it may be, will require a display of US geostrategic skill on the western, eastern, and southern perimeters of Eurasia simultaneously."

These broad considerations were behind the NATO war on Serbia in 1999, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and now the threats against Iran. As its economic power has waned, Washington has increasingly used its military might as a lever against its rivals. Brzezinski's comments make clear both the importance of Iran and also the centrality of China in American strategic thinking. The struggle for influence in Central Asia is bound up with a broader strategy of encircling China with US allies and military bases stretching from South Korea and Japan through South East Asia to South and Central Asia.

China has not passively stood by. Together with Russia, it formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with several Central Asian republics just prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Iran has been included in SCO as an observer state, although Moscow and Beijing have rejected Tehran's application for full-membership, for fear of openly antagonising Washington. Nevertheless, the formation of SCO and its embrace of Iran have exacerbated tensions with the US.

Beijing has also been moving to protect its vital energy supplies from the Middle East. As well as developing a blue-water navy to defend its sea routes, China has been seeking to build pipelines to provide a land alternative to vulnerable sea-lanes. Iran is central to its strategy. Turkmenistan has just announced that it will begin supplying gas to China via a 7,000-kilometre gas pipeline in December. A shorter pipeline providing gas to Iran has the potential to operate in reverse—supplying Iranian gas to China—once Iran begins to open up its huge reserves.

The possibility of an alternate pipeline through Pakistan is also emerging. Under US pressure, India has prevaricated on finalising plans for a 3,000-kilometre Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. Iran has warned that if India does not decide, it may become the Iran-Pakistan-China pipeline, provoking immediate protests in New Delhi.

Beijing is acutely conscious of the role of energy in its rivalry with the US. The September issue of *Asia & Africa Review*, published by a government think tank, noted: "The US always sought to control the faucet of global oil supplies. There is cooperation between China and the US, but there is also struggle, and the US has always seen us as potential foe." It then warned: "Bilateral quarrels and clashes [between US and China] are unavoidable. We cannot lower vigilance against hostility in the Middle East over energy interests and security."

This rivalry with China in the Middle East and Central Asia underscores the fact that the US-led campaign against Iran has nothing to do with Tehran's nuclear programs. Rather the nuclear issue is simply a convenient pretext in a struggle over economic and strategic interests that has the potential to trigger broader conflict.



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