

Bucking US threats, China and Iran sign 25-year treaty

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This weekend, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to Tehran and signed a 25-year treaty with his Iranian counterpart, Javad Zarif. The terms of the treaty were not disclosed. However, US news outlets noted that an earlier draft of the treaty, obtained by US officials and shown to the *New York Times*, entailed \$400 billion in Chinese investment in Iran in exchange for exports of Iranian oil, as well as a strategic alliance.

Beijing is defying economic sanctions imposed by former US President Donald Trump after he unilaterally scrapped the 2015 Iranian nuclear treaty in 2018, and that incoming US President Joe Biden has yet to remove. In February, Biden suddenly bombed an Iranian-backed militia in Syria, killing at least 17 people.

Beijing's decision to sign the treaty with Tehran followed a disastrous US-China summit earlier this month in Alaska. During remarks to the press before summit proceedings even began, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly lectured Wang that China must accept a "rules-based international order" set by Washington, or face "a far more violent and unstable world." Afterwards, US Pacific Fleet commander Admiral John Aquilino threatened that a US war with China over Taiwan "is much closer to us than most think."

By signing a treaty with Tehran, Beijing is signaling that it has concluded that it must make its own preparations against a Biden administration that will be aggressive and relentlessly hostile. It is no doubt confirmed in this view by continuing, groundless war propaganda from US politicians, debunked by scientists, alleging that COVID-19 was manufactured in a Chinese lab.

At the Anchorage conference, Wang replied to Blinken by contrasting China's commitment to international law with US imperialism's foreign policy in the Middle East. "We do not believe in invading through the use of force, or to topple other regimes through various means, or to

massacre the people of other countries because all of those would only cause turmoil and instability in this world. And at the end of the day, all of those would not serve the United States well."

Before traveling to Tehran, Wang hosted his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, for talks in the Chinese city of Guilin, shortly after Biden provocatively denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "killer" who does not have a "human soul."

At the signing of the treaty this weekend, Iranian and Chinese officials both made pointed criticisms of Washington's threats. Zarif called China a "friend of difficult days," adding that "we thank and praise the stance of China during the oppressive sanctions."

Wang replied, "Relations between our two countries have now reached a strategic level, and China is seeking to promote inclusive relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. ... The signing of the road-map for strategic cooperation between the two countries shows Beijing's will to promote ties to the highest possible level."

According to China's state-run *Global Times*, Wang told Iranian officials "China is willing to oppose hegemony and bullying, safeguard international justice and fairness as well as uphold international norms together with people of Iran and other countries."

The treaty, first discussed between Iranian Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei and Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016, deepens economic ties with the Middle East that Beijing has sought to develop with its Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure program. Citing Iranian Ambassador to China Mohammad Keshavarz-Zadeh, the *Tehran Times* reported that the treaty "specifies the capacities for cooperation between Iran and China, especially in areas of technology, industries, transportation and energy." Chinese firms have built mass transit systems, railways and other key infrastructure in Iran.

While Washington has not yet publicly reacted to the Iran–China treaty, US officials have previously denounced it as a fundamental challenge to Washington’s interests, combining “war on terror” propaganda with attempts to revive Cold War anti-communism.

Amid speculation last December that the treaty would be signed, Director of the US State Department Policy Planning Staff Peter Berkowitz denounced it to *Al Arabiya*. He claimed it would be “very bad news for the free world” if the treaty were adopted: “Iran sows terrorism, death and destruction throughout the region. To be empowered by the People’s Republic of China would only intensify the threat.”

The three decades since the US-led Gulf War against Iraq and the Stalinist regime’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 have exposed such rhetoric. The elimination of the Soviet Union as the main military counterweight to the NATO imperialist powers did not lead to peace, nor was Iran the main source of “death and destruction.” For three decades, Washington and its European imperialist allies have laid waste to countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, killing millions based on lies such as the claim that Iraq was hiding “weapons of mass destruction.”

Berkowitz’s denunciations of Iran and China are bound up with growing concern in Washington that it could lose its globally hegemonic position due to the debacles of its wars, its fading industrial and economic weight, and now its disastrous handling of the pandemic.

Since the NATO powers launched a war for regime change in Syria in 2011, supporting first Islamist and then Kurdish nationalist militias, Iran, Russia and increasingly China have intervened to bolster Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. With the China–Iran treaty, it is now clear that these NATO wars carry in them the seeds of a global conflict, as in the 20th century, for control of world markets and strategic advantage.

The rising industrial weight of Asia and specifically China as a workshop for transnational corporations has intensified these geopolitical conflicts. China’s trade with the Middle East rose to \$294.4 billion in 2019, having surpassed US trade with the Middle East in 2010. Beijing is Tehran’s leading trade partner and plans to further develop infrastructure linking China through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey to its key export markets in Europe under its Belt and Road Initiative.

The fate of the China–Iran treaty is highly uncertain. Certainly, it faces powerful domestic opposition within Iran, where broad sections of the ruling class have

unsuccessfully sought to develop ties with Europe in the face of US sanctions. Former President Mahmoud Amhadinejad pledged that “The Iranian nation will not recognize a new, secret 25-year agreement between Iran and China,” when the treaty was first announced in June.

Chinese media were at pains to deny US allegations that the treaty was aimed at Washington. The *Global Times* complained that the China–Iran treaty was “interpreted by some Western media from a geopolitical competition perspective...to portray the normally deepening bilateral cooperation between China and Iran as a challenge against the US.”

Beijing and Tehran are not looking for war with Washington, but US imperialism has made clear that it reserves the right to bomb or invade anyone it sees as a challenge to its hegemony. The Chinese and Iranian regimes—oscillating between seeking a deal with and defying the imperialist powers—ultimately have no progressive solution to this growing danger of war, rooted in the bankruptcy of the world capitalist system. In the final analysis, avoiding a war requires the international mobilization of the working class.

The China–Iran treaty underscores how the global redistribution of economic and industrial weight has undermined the existing international alliances and geopolitical alignments. The contradiction that the great Marxists of the 20th century identified as driving to world war—between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system—emerges again with enormous force. The critical question that emerges is to mobilize the working class on an international, socialist program against war.



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