
Iran's Conventional Military Relations with China Under Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to examine the Sino-Iranian conventional military relationship under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the years between 2005 and 2013. The study has attempted to briefly answer the question that how Tehran has continued to build stronger defense capability with the help of Beijing despite the American hegemonic, anti-Iranian policies. The paper has theoretically adopted a realist approach to International Relations and is methodologically based on document analysis. As the paper argues, despite the Western sanctions and U.S containment strategy against the Islamic Republic, Ahmadinejad's Iran, in line with its look to the East approach to foreign relations, successfully developed its indigenous military technology capability further through cooperation with the emerging powers such as the People's Republic of China on the basis of pragmatic calculations of power and interest.

Keywords: Ahmadinejad, China, Iran, Military, Relations.

Introduction

Based on a survey made by the Gallup, more than sixty percent of American people believe that Iran's nuclear development activities pose "serious" or "somewhat serious" threat to the United States (Gallup, 2009). This is while just two years earlier National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had held a substantially different view on what has always been called in American policy circles as "the Iranian threat". According to 2007 NIE

report which reflected the coordinated assessment of the U.S Intelligence Community -the group of sixteen U.S intelligence agencies- in autumn 2003, Iran had stopped its nuclear enrichment activities and thus could no longer be perceived as a major threat to the U.S national security (Kreps, 2008). With this in mind, it seems that notwithstanding Western media hype and U.S leaders' rhetoric about the nature of Iran's civil

nuclear energy program what is of great concern to Washington is Iran's accomplishments in developing its indigenous defense capabilities.

Since the aftermath of the Cold War demise, the Islamic Republic has successfully strengthened its military build-up by seeking closer military ties with powers like Russia and China, both of whom has had their own reasons to oppose the U.S-dominated international system. Tired of U.S hegemonic containment policies and Western-led sanctions and in response to constant threats from the American and Israeli leadership to take military action against Iranian nuclear sites and military facilities, Tehran has sought a security-driven foreign policy based on internal and external balancing. As a result of efforts made by different Iranian administrations across the years, Iran has emerged as the most powerful state in the critical Persian Gulf that possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the region. Although Iranian officials have repeatedly declared that the focus of the country's military strategy is essentially defensive and based on conventional deterrence, Iran's military development has always been under intense scrutiny by the United States and its allies in the European Union and Middle East.

The objective of this paper is to briefly overview Iran's conventional-missile cooperation with the People's Republic of China in the years of the Ahmadinejad administration. This is the period in which Iran's nuclear enrichment program drew the attention of the world, made this country the subject of international sanctions, and turned into the most challenging issue of Iran's relations with the outside world. The paper argues that despite the Western-led international pressure and U.S isolationist strategy

against the Islamic Republic, Tehran emerged successful in maintaining military ties with Beijing and developing its indigenous defense capability. The paper is essentially realist in its theoretical approach and has focused on 'conventional deterrence' as the main concept which can explain the Iranian leaders' incentives in forging military cooperation with the PRC. The research is methodologically based on document analysis. This method is an important form of qualitative social research in which documents or materials are interpreted by the researcher to give better sense of a subject.

The paper is organized into two main sections: in the first section there will be a general discussion on the Iranian conventional deterrence strategy after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and in the second section which constitutes the main focus of the research at hand, the Sino-Iranian military ties during the years of the Ahmadinejad administration will be highlighted. The paper will be ended with concluding remarks.

The International Context of Iran's Conventional Deterrence Strategy

Based on the realist school of thought, that includes a number of sub-trends, the international system is seen as an anarchic arena in a state of constant rivalry where no actor above states can regulate international relations. States, as the most important actors in global politics and rational players, are inclined to pursue self-interest, are primarily concerned with survival, try to maximize their power, and decide on relations with other entities on their own. In other words, there is no higher controlling entity that has enough power to dictate them how to behave (Donnelly, 2008). States attempt to balance perceived threats to their national security through a variety of measures.

Most importantly they tend to come together and form alliances and alignments against threatening powers while trying to enhance their own military capabilities and deterrence abilities vis-à-vis their enemies.

Iran's military cooperation with China can be best explained within the realist approach to International Relations. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran has constantly tried to protect its survival interests and national security vis-à-vis its regional and international foes. It has attempted to overcome the challenges in its security environment either through internal and external balancing. Within this context, conventional deterrence has been a major pillar of Iranian military strategy. Leaders in Tehran have always believed that the country's conventional defense can provide it with a reasonably reliable deterrent against the "enemies of the Revolution", most importantly the United States and Israel.

Within the bipolar geopolitical structure of the Cold War era the two superpowers were the center of all strategic decisions and actions made by national governments. In fact, states' leaders had almost no choice but to consider superpower politics when they wanted to set the path for actions in response to regional and international developments. During the last decade of the Cold War, the Islamic Republic was grappling with problems at home and a bloody war with Iraq and had therefore no time to focus on the country's development and investment needs.

With the end of eight-year war with Iraq and subsequently the disappearance of the bipolar international system in the early-1990s radical security changes dominated Iran's international environment. In this new setting, Tehran found a wider scope to concentrate on development and

reconstruction plans, including the improvement of the country's shattered military infrastructure. In this time, having enough military might to carry out plausible military retaliatory actions positioned at the centerpiece of the Iranian defense doctrine. Iranian defense policy has relied heavily on its conventional capability during the entire post-Cold War era. To this end, Tehran began its effort to develop an indigenous defense system with the help of its northern neighbor, Russia, once a superpower, as well as China which had begun its economic reform in the late-1970s and was trying to find a proper foothold in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.

During the uncertain years after the end of the Cold War, Iran successfully developed its military capabilities to confirm its position in the region as the most powerful actor whose deterrence could prevent the other states from resorting to conventional war. Undoubtedly, the role of China was crucial in this regard. Under the Hashemi and Khatami administrations, Iran cultivated an increasingly warm relationship with the PRC not only to neutralize ministrations, Iran cultivated an increasingly warm relationship with the PRC not only to neutralize Western pressure and to continue economic development plans but also to guarantee its national security through boosting its conventional military arsenal and modernizing its defense capabilities. With this background in mind, the remainder of the paper will deal with Iran's military cooperation with China during one of the most controversial period of the Iranian modern history, i.e. the years of Ahmadinejad presidency.

The Sino-Iranian Conventional Military Ties under Ahmadinejad

There is almost no detailed and verifiable data available documenting the real nature and extent of the Sino-Iranian military ties during Ahmadinejad's tenure. However, according to some media reports, despite international sanctions, the two states have had close cooperation in military matters in recent years. Statistics from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) show that Iran-China military trade continued at a steady pace in the years between 2005 and 2012. According to SIPRI, conventional weapons exported by China to Iran were valued at \$470 million, or an average of \$67.1 million/year. This is while, the Russian Federation, as Iran's major arms supplier in the post-Cold War era, maintained its position in Iran's arms market by exporting nearly \$802 million in military goods to this country during the same period. However, based on available statistics, there has been a considerable decline in Russian arms transfers to Iran since 2008, making Beijing as the single largest military partner of Tehran during Ahmadinejad's second term as president. The average value of annual Russian arms exports to Iran during the first three years of Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2007) was estimated to be \$248 million. This amount dropped by about 94 percent and averaged just \$15 million in the years between 2008 and 2011 (NTI, 2012).

With this in mind, one can attribute the main factor that caused such meaningful decline to growing international and unilateral sanctions against Tehran over its nuclear program. In December 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1737 that banned the sale of equipments related to nuclear weapon delivery systems to Iran. The embargo also included certain technologies which can be used in conventional military applications. In

February 2007, the European Union, in line with UNSC, imposed a number of sanctions on the Islamic Republic that prohibited member states from directly or indirectly supplying Iran with items, materials, and technologies contained in the Missile Technology Control Regime. Later on, the EU imposed further prohibition on the sale, supply, or transfer of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, paramilitary equipment, military vehicles, and spare parts for the aforesaid. In March of the same year, adopting Resolution 1747, the Security Council imposed an additional embargo on weaponry exports from Iran. In March 2008, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1803 which extended travel ban and asset freezes against some Iranian officials, prohibiting Tehran from trading almost all nuclear and missile-related technology. This was followed in June 2010 when the Security Council Resolution 1929 imposed severe restrictions on the export of most major conventional arms to Iran. The new resolution has called states to avoid directly or indirectly supply, or help to supply, the Islamic Republic with key conventional weapons including battle tanks, armored vehicles, large caliber artillery, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, warships, certain missiles and missile launchers, as well as related spare parts along with technical training, advice, services or assistance related to the provision, manufacture, maintenance or use of the listed items. States are also called upon to limit the trade of those weaponry and related equipments not covered by the embargo to Iran (SIPRI, 2012) & (Iran Watch, 2012). Indeed, in light of international pressure, Medvedev's Russia seemed increasingly reluctant to bolster its conventional arms exports to Iran. As Beehner (2006) argues, Moscow's

military ties with other partners such as Beijing and New Delhi by far outweigh those with Tehran.

According to Western media reports, during Ahmadinejad's tenure, the PRC continued shipment of arms devices, spare parts, and especially what is so called as sensitive military equipments and dual-use components to Iran (Zarif, 2009). It is said that Chinese companies supplied Iran with a wide range of military equipments including large-caliber sniper rifles, armor-piercing rounds, C-802 (Silkworm) anti-ship cruise missiles, shoulder-fired HN-5 anti-aircraft missiles, 107mm rockets, 60mm and 82mm mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, anti-aircraft guns, landmines, and components for roadside bombs (Cordesman and Fite, 2011). Reportedly, China sold a number of speed boats, fast attack crafts, as well as small midget submarines to Iran. Moreover, it has also provided Tehran with considerable assistance to enhance its capabilities in satellite mapping for space launch vehicles and launch vehicle staging that could be in line with Tehran's plans for developing the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) series (Rajagopalan, 2010).

Not surprisingly, Washington strongly opposed Beijing's military ties with Tehran. Meanwhile, seemingly the United States has not been successful to prevent the continuation of China's arms sales to Iran. In June 2008, U.S Defense Department officials testified to Congress that Washington's effort to convince Beijing to stop its military trade with Tehran has met with "mixed results" (Kan, 2010). In its 2009 report to Congress, U.S Secretary of Defense asserted that Beijing, with commercial and strategic purposes, has continued to sell arms, ammunition, and advanced weapons systems to developing states such as Iran and

Pakistan. Describing the Sino-Iranian military relationship as "a serious issue that the United States continues to monitor", the report also asserts that despite supporting the Security Council Resolutions 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1835 by the Chinese government, concerns remain about Beijing's commitment to non-proliferation regimes regarding arms transfers to Iran (SecDef, 2009).

Bearing all above facts in mind, one should not overestimate the importance of the Sino-Iranian arms trade. Indeed, despite the media hype, arms imports accounts for only a small fraction of Iran's total imports from China. For instance, in 2011, the value of Iran's arms purchases from the PRC estimated to be \$79 million, representing only 0.53 percent of its total \$14.8 billion of imports from this country in the same year (Trade Map, 2012). It is also interesting to note that according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, total value of imports of conventional arms by Iran from China in the years between 2005 and 2011, were very much lesser than those of its neighbors from the western states in the same interval of time. As an example, while Iran's imports of Chinese military hardware totaled \$470 million during the mentioned period, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates purchased \$2.6 billion, \$1.1 billion, \$1.6 billion, and \$4.9 billion of military supplies from the United States, respectively (NTI, 2012).

In effect, what is of greater importance for the West regarding the Sino-Iranian military relations is China's sharing of know-how and experiences in reverse engineering with the Islamic Republic rather than arms trade (VU, 2010). Western media and officials have persistently accused China of providing Iran with scientific technical expertise,

blueprints and missile production technologies. In May 2009, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report highlighted that Beijing along with Moscow have been helping Tehran to develop its ballistic missiles production capabilities to become to a certain extent self-sufficient in this respect (Gertz, 2009). It has also been claimed by a number of sources that as a result of growing external pressures Tehran and Beijing have increasingly turned to less-official channels and entities to evade arms export controls (Zarif, 2009). In January 2010, the Associated Press reported that the PRC, via its middlemen and front firms, has assisted the Islamic Republic to acquire sensitive US-supplied weaponry (Wu, 2010). In response to such claims, Beijing has constantly denied being involved in illicit arms trade with Tehran and Chinese officials have announced that China's arms transfers to Iran have always been in the framework of "normal military trade" and "cooperation with other countries" (Kan, 2010).

Generally speaking, during the period since the mid-2000s, as well as before, three major incentives pushed the Islamic Republic to maintain military ties with the PRC: achieving a greater degree of self-reliance in defense systems, strengthening the country's status as a regional power, and providing a more effective deterrence against external threats (ONI, 2009). In line with these goals, it seems that Tehran truly benefitted from its cooperation with Beijing. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran placed more emphasis on internal balancing strategies (through military build-ups, strengthening armed forces, and indigenous development of military assets) rather than relying on external assistance. One can argue that Tehran's effort towards self-reliance in defense technologies is understandable. Iran has

constantly been the target of severe international sanctions and has frequently been threatened by the U.S and Israel with unilateral pre-emptive strikes. Washington has always asserted that it would keep 'all options on the table' to force this country to stop its nuclear development program. Meanwhile, military observers increasingly believe that Iran has made significant progress in developing its own indigenous military capabilities during the recent years. Some reports even indicate that, despite the sanctions, Tehran has taken major steps towards self-reliance and is increasingly less-dependent on external sources in the field of missile-based deterrence which has been at the core of the Islamic Republic's military doctrine since the aftermath of the Cold War (Rubin, 2012). According to mass media reports, since the early-2000s, Iran has successfully tested a number of ballistic and cruise missiles, and even is said to have begun to launch mass production of its cruise missiles (India Times, 2012). It is also estimated that Iran was the largest deployed ballistic missile force in the region in 2010 (Burgess, 2010).

With the increased tensions between Iran and the West since Ahmadinejad's second term, there seemed no sign indicating that China was likely to support U.S tough sanctions on the Islamic Republic over its nuclear program. It is believed that Iran continued to develop its military capabilities with substantial helps from China. In late-September 2010, when Kremlin, in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 1929, decided to halt all sales of what was described as 'sophisticated Russian weaponry' to Iran, it was China that helped the Islamic Republic to fill the vacuum. This is what some analysts had predicted heretofore, claiming that Medvedev's plan to open a

'new page' in Russia's relationship with the U.S would likely force this country to defer the delivery of advanced missile systems to Iran. Meanwhile, Press TV (2009), an Iran-associated channel, quoting from a Russian news source, reported that Tehran has turned its attention from Moscow to Beijing which has recently put its HQ-9 surface-to-air missile (known as FD-2000) on the export market and is said to be a replica version of the Russian-made S-300. Unsurprisingly, Moscow's refusal to deliver the advanced Russian S-300 air defense system provoked an unprecedented anger in Tehran. During a speech for the people of the town of Bojnourd in North Khorasan province, President Ahmadinejad accused Kremlin of 'selling out' to Washington, stating that Iran still considers the 2007 contract over S-300 missiles to be valid and if Russians do not fulfill their commitments Tehran "will seek its rights, the losses and the fines on it" (UPI, 2010). Just few days after Ahmadinejad's speech, news sources reported that Iran has successfully tested its local version of a missile system that Russia refused to supply Iran with. Press TV quoted an Iranian high-ranking military official as saying Iran had upgraded another Russian-made missile system to perform like the S-300 (Pomeroy, 2010). Meanwhile, some military commentators claimed that Iran would have obtained the S-300 missile system through Chinese suppliers; the issue that was described by the Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi as a 'baseless rumor' (Farsnews, 2010). However, Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the *Russia in Global Affairs* magazine, believes that Tehran got its surface-to-air systems from Beijing. "For the Chinese, their trade with Iran is pure business not mixed with any ideological undertones", Lukyanov

said. In his view, such transfers would have no serious international consequences for Beijing. According to him "Beijing is now being persuaded to approve new sanctions against Iran, so the sale of surface-to-air systems will be ignored" (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 2010).

Conclusion

The paper took a glance at Iran's military ties with China during Ahmadinejad's presidency. As was discussed, during this period, the Iranian government tried to develop an increasingly warmer relationship with China within the context of a broader policy of look to the East. Within this context, in response to U.S military presence across the country's borders and to strengthen defense capabilities, Tehran did continue to bolster its military ties with Beijing. Along this line, Iran focused on arms transfers from China while trying to seeking the Chinese help to develop its own effective indigenous defense system. As the paper showed, U.S isolationist policies against Iran has proved to be failed and Western-led international sanctions, Israeli anti-Iranian efforts, and even Russian capitulation to the United States under Dmitry Medvedev had almost little to do with the continuation of the Sino-Iranian conventional military relationship in the years since the mid-2005.

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