

Breaking: China's Iran Strategy REVEALED

| Sheng Zhang

China's silence in the first weeks on Iran was not a mistake. Beijing is highly strategic in its approach to the latest US war of aggression, and it's quite surprising what's behind the reasoning. Today I'm talking again to Mr. Sheng Zhang, a Chinese West-Asia expert who explains the driving rationale behind China's approach to the Iran War. Support us on substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com>
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#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody. My name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Kyoto University, and today I'm joined again by a good colleague, Mr. Sheng Zhang, a non-resident visiting researcher at Turkey's Koç University. Sheng, welcome back.

#Sheng Zhang

Thank you.

#Pascal

Thanks for taking the time, because we want to talk about China's approach toward the Iran war. You're one of the analysts who always keeps a very close eye on Chinese foreign policy. Last time we talked, you explained to me the various approaches in China toward the genocide in Gaza. So, three weeks ago—well, two weeks ago—we're now in the third week of the U.S.–Israel–Iran war, the all-out war, the bombing campaigns on both sides, and of course the unprovoked attack on Iran. Yet, when there was a Security Council resolution last week proposed by the United States, it got a significant number of supporting states and condemned not the United States and Israel, but Iran's attacks on neighboring Gulf countries. That resolution passed. I never thought it could, because I always assumed China and Russia would clearly veto it. Yet neither of them did. I'm not going to ask you about Russia, but about China—why did China not veto that?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, actually, I was a little bit surprised by that vote as well. I mean, I personally have a lot of criticism of it, but I'm just trying to explain what the rationale might have been for the Chinese diplomats—what they were thinking when they made that decision, without necessarily defending it myself. So, the first thing is that, as we talked about last time regarding China's actions on the UN Security Council resolution about Palestine, China is often very cautious—sometimes you could even

say overcautious—about using its veto power. Normally, when they do use it, it means they're trying to send a message: even if you're going to keep pushing this, we're going to sabotage the plan.

That's normally what they've been doing. And specifically about this resolution, there are some particular circumstances around it. The first thing is that it was basically proposed and backed mainly by the Gulf countries—the Gulf Arab countries that were physically attacked by Iran's weapons when the war started. Of course, Iran did that as retaliation for the U.S. and Israeli invasion of Iran. But the background of this particular resolution is that the Gulf monarchies felt they were attacked and wanted to push forward something condemning that attack. And for the Chinese, they felt that China could definitely support something condemning the U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran.

But at the same time, if they veto this resolution, they feel like that would mean they're supporting the Iranian attack on the Gulf monarchies, which is a little bit different from their official stance. Their official stance right now is basically that all sides should stop the war. And then, of course, they blame the Israelis and Americans more. If you look at the video of the UN discussion during this vote, you can see that the Chinese representative was very straightforward in explaining why they abstained instead of voting in favor of the resolution. The argument was that this all started with the U.S. and Israeli bombing and the assassination of Iran's supreme leader, and the killing of civilians. So the Chinese are definitely not, in any way, supporting the U.S.-Israeli stance over Iran.

But at the same time, they feel that if they veto this particular resolution, it would make the Gulf Arab countries feel like China is supporting the Iranian attack on their facilities. And right now, China still values its friendship with the Gulf monarchies. We can talk about that later—whether China should feel that way or if there's any critique of it—but for today, what the Chinese government is thinking is that they still want to maintain a close and friendly relationship with the Arab monarchies in the Gulf.

And that's one important piece of background. Another thing is that the Chinese didn't expect that to be the only resolution. Because, you know, after that, on March 11th, I think the Russians proposed another resolution condemning all attacks against civilians—which, of course, would include what the Israelis and Americans did at the beginning of the war. And China voted in favor of that. That resolution was more about criticizing all attacks on civilians and demanding that all sides stop the war. And if you look at how the Russians framed it, it was very clearly a resolution targeting the United States. And the Chinese voted in favor of it.

But of course, that resolution was vetoed by the United States. And alongside, I think Latvia was the only other country that sided with the United States in that vote. So it was a very disappointing moment when that resolution was vetoed. But I think what the Chinese were thinking was that, in order to maintain some sort of self-claimed balanced stance on this issue, they would not block the Bahrain-proposed condemnation of the Iranian attack. At the same time, if Russia or Iran proposed something condemning U.S. and Israeli attacks on civilians, the Chinese would vote in favor of that as well. So I think that was the rationale behind their move.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again anytime. So please consider subscribing not only here, but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's in the description below. And now, back to the video. Now, that makes very good sense. So we should not understand the non-vetoing of this resolution as support for the United States, but rather as a form of support—or at least non-opposition—to the Gulf monarchies, because China is interested not only in its relationship with Iran, but also in its relationship with the Gulf monarchies.

And they are, after all, the ones who asked the Security Council to do something on their behalf. Then that resolution was tabled. Okay, so that's again very much in line with what you told me last time—that while the United States treats the veto like a royal prerogative that it wields anytime it's not 100% behind a resolution, China uses it in a much more nuanced way. But this time, that meant the resolution condemning Iran passed. How was it perceived inside China? Or how is the war—the start of the war, its development—how is it perceived inside China, from what you can tell from the local media?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think overall it's pretty clear that China somehow expected this war to happen. What the Chinese were feeling—and we can talk about this in more depth later—is that in the last few years, they thought Iran might be acting a bit naively in many situations, especially in its relations with the United States and Israel. The Chinese felt that one day, and probably quite soon, the United States would attack Iran. And especially after the October 7th incidents in 2023, when Israel and Iran were already firing missiles at each other, that feeling grew stronger.

During that time, the Chinese already felt that the United States would one day come in against Iran and launch some sort of larger attack. So it wasn't really a surprise for China to see this war happen. The overall feeling among Chinese civilians is that they are very, very sympathetic toward Iran—and I'd say the same about the government as well. At the beginning of the war, actually, the Chinese were a bit pessimistic. You could see it in the atmosphere, in the media, and in people's comments. I think that also explains why the Chinese government was very low-key at the start of the war.

Part of the atmosphere was that this was the underlying mood they were voting in favor of—like abstaining, not doing more diplomatically to help Iran in the UN Security Council. I think China in general was a little pessimistic about how Iran would react to this war. Because, you know, especially since last year, when Israel was bombing Iran, the Chinese felt it was so easy for the Israelis to assassinate important figures in Iran—either someone like Haniyeh, the Politburo member of Hamas, or very important leaders and commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Those people were assassinated very easily last year during the 12 Days War, and Haniyeh was assassinated before the 12 Days War. But during that war, the Chinese were a little disappointed with Iran's performance, wondering, why is it so infiltrated by Mossad? Why is it so easy for top military commanders to be assassinated? Shortly after that, at the beginning of this year, we saw protests—or riots, however you want to describe them—happening in the streets of Iranian cities. All of those events gave the Chinese a feeling, actually quite a strong feeling, that they're not very optimistic about Iran's ability to defend itself if the war breaks out again.

And especially if we talk about the 12 Days War, the Chinese were thinking, oh, maybe the Iranians would keep fighting a little longer. But it didn't happen—it ended after 12 days. That's why it's called the 12 Days War. So at the beginning of this war, the Chinese government, and then the public as well, didn't have very high expectations for Iran. And it's not because the Chinese don't like Iran; I'd say it's because they really want Iran to perform well. They put some expectations—and sometimes imagination—on Iran, which may not align with the actual situation there. But still, they felt maybe Iran should be doing much better.

And when the war started, they were very afraid that a regime change could easily happen in Iran or something like that. Because at the beginning of the day, Ayatollah Khamenei was assassinated. So the Chinese were freaking out about that. They were like, oh, last year so many people got assassinated, and this year again the supreme leader gets assassinated. Does this mean that Iran is so infiltrated that the regime might fall? Are they able to continue fighting? So that's where the sentiment was—a kind of freaking-out stage. But as we see now, after two weeks, actually even in the first several days, especially after the Iranians announced that Ayatollah Khamenei was assassinated, the Chinese were noticing that Iran was actually doing much better than they had thought.

When Ali Khamenei was assassinated, that didn't stop Iran's retaliation against the U.S. and Israeli invasion. So far, the Iranians are actually self-organizing very well. You can see their military, their Revolutionary Guard, working very efficiently in their retaliation against U.S. assets in the region. And we don't see any, I'd say, fifth column in the streets of Tehran trying to cooperate with U.S. or Israeli airstrikes. Actually, both Trump and Netanyahu were calling for that, but it didn't happen.

So overall, we saw the video of the Iranian assembly and the people protesting in the streets against the U.S. after Khamenei's assassination. It was going very viral on Chinese social media, and people were happily surprised by that because they had expected Khamenei's death might cause people to lose faith in the resistance and things like that. But actually, what we're seeing is that the Iranian people are coming to the streets, showing their support for the resistance. And we see that the Iranian leadership was also joining them in the streets—you can see the video of Pascal Lottaz and several other leaders at the Al-Quds Day protest, I think two or three days ago.

All of this shows the resilience of Iranian society against the U.S. imperialist invasion. Nothing surprised the Chinese audience more, I think. One important detail I want to share is that during the first week of the war, the Iranian embassy in Beijing published a statement on its official social media account saying they had received many calls, emails, and messages from ordinary Chinese people asking how they could donate money to Iran. The embassy said, "We appreciate your signs of friendship, but we cannot accept the money." That's what they published, and I think it really shows the overall sympathy of Chinese society toward Iran.

A similar thing happened with the Palestinians in the last two years. During the Gaza genocide, the Palestinian embassy in China also published something similar, saying they had received so many comments, emails, and calls asking how to donate, but that they were not accepting monitored donations at the moment. That's something unique to the Chinese society's reaction to the Palestinians and Iranians. For example, the Israelis never got that. The Israeli embassy in Beijing never needed to publish a statement saying, "We have so many people who want to donate to us," because normally people don't want to do that. So I think that's a good example showing the overall sentiment of the Chinese people.

#Pascal

Okay, so the sympathies are very, very clearly distributed. But the approach of the Chinese government is, I would say, rather difficult. Because on the one hand, it seems that Beijing does not want to let Iran hang out there to dry and just suffer. On the other hand, it's also a problem for China that the war is now impacting the Strait of Hormuz. Although, by now—I must say, we're talking today on Monday, March 16th, of course, depending on where you are in the world—the pronouncements we have from the Iranians are that they want to let pass ships of friendly nations and ships of nations that fulfill a couple of checklists.

One of the things we've read—though I'm not entirely sure how true it is, since it's from Twitter—is that ships carrying oil traded in yuan would be allowed to pass. I'm not sure if that's true, but that's what's being said right now. Do you have any more concrete information on this? And do you know of any reactions from China about how they view the closure of the Strait of Hormuz? I mean, de facto, it's closed at the moment, although a few ships seem to have been able to pass with Iranian consent, actually, I must say.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, so as I was saying, the Chinese, I think, expected this war to happen sooner or later. But because of the impact of the 12-day war last year, they were initially very pessimistic and actually quite worried about Iran at the beginning of this war. I think that's why they're being overly cautious in their reaction. In many cases, they don't want to, you know, pick a side and then have things fall apart. For China, the experience was that they diplomatically supported the Assad regime in Syria for

more than ten years, and then Assad's fall caused a lot of problems between China and the Jilani regime.

#Pascal

An embarrassment, right?

#Sheng Zhang

It was an embarrassment.

#Pascal

They want to avoid supporting the losing side.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, they want to avoid supporting the losing side. They don't want a new regime to emerge and automatically hate China. I think that's the more pragmatic side of China's thinking. And especially, I think the Assad case really left a very bad memory—or even trauma—for the Chinese, because Assad was in China, like, I think two or three months before the regime suddenly collapsed in less than ten days. So the Chinese were very afraid of that. But again, this time, I think the Chinese were happily surprised and really started to understand Iran's resilience and national strength. And I would assume that as the Iranian resistance continues longer, the longer it goes, the more we can expect China to be supportive in its actions.

Because right now we're getting to the third week of the war. I mean, I don't want to single out China in this. Like, let's say, I'm not trying to say only China has this kind of "don't want to be on the losing side" mentality, because even the West is doing that as well. If you look at how the West reacted to the Ukraine war, for example—in the beginning, the West felt like, oh, Ukraine's probably going to fall. So actually, if you look at the main support from the West, I mean military support going to Ukraine, it came almost a month after the war started. Before that, the West was hesitating, like, well, what should we do? Should we give this, or should we not?

And things like that. It was after about one month, when the government in Kyiv showed it could keep fighting, that the West started to be more supportive—especially by providing arms and supplies to Kyiv. So I'm not saying the Chinese would directly give weapons or anything; I don't have any inside information on that. But my feeling is that if Iran can keep up its resistance at the current stage—maybe in three or four weeks, I mean, we're already in the third week—so maybe this week or next week, which would make it about a month, you might see Chinese diplomatic support for Iran become stronger than it was.

As far as I know, trade has always been going on between China and Iran. What the Chinese have been trying to do is economically empower Iran so that it can continue developing its national defense industries and so on. The Chinese have always been buying oil from Iran, and this trade preceded the war. During the war, the Chinese never said that because of the war risk they would stop buying Iranian oil. So the Chinese are still buying it, and they're still selling things to Iran. That selling can include a lot of technical equipment that the Iranians could use to manufacture arms or similar things—I mean, I don't know for sure.

I don't think the Chinese are directly selling arms to Iran at the moment, but they are selling a lot of equipment related to Iran's national industries. Some of those things could be used for war. I don't know if you've seen this thing the Chinese are selling to Iran right now—it's kind of like an air mattress: you pump air into it, it expands, and it takes the shape of a tank or a helicopter or something like that.

#Pascal

Inflatable tanks and inflatable airplanes that work as decoys—like inflatable decoys.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, you can put that thing out there to make the United States or Israel waste their expensive missiles. That's something the Chinese were selling to them before the war and during the war as well. And another thing is the drones. China is, as you know, probably the largest producer of drones in the world and has some of the best drone technology. China has been providing a lot of that technology to Iran—before the war and during the war as well.

So I would assume that this thing might get stronger and stronger as the war continues. And the more Iran demonstrates that it's determined to fight against imperialist invasions, the more supportive I think the Chinese stance will be, because China wants to make sure they're supporting someone who's not going to surrender the next day. And about the Strait of Hormuz, I think it's important to distinguish—when trying to understand Chinese diplomacy—that a lot of times what the Chinese do is actually very different from what they say in diplomatic rhetoric.

#Pascal

Okay.

#Sheng Zhang

I mean, in diplomatic rhetoric, you always have to say beautiful things. The West doesn't do that all the time, but in diplomacy, you're expected to say nice things. So that's why it's not surprising to me—and I guess not surprising to a lot of other observers—that the Chinese were saying things like,

“Oh, we should not block the Strait of Hormuz, this is very important,” and so on. But that doesn’t mean China disapproves of what Iran is doing. It just means the Chinese were saying that for two reasons. One is for their own international image—you don’t want to be the ones saying, “Yeah, let’s block the oil,” and everything, right?

The second thing is that I think this is actually sending a signal of pressure to the West. And by “the West,” I mean not only Europe and the United States, but also Japan, which is very dependent on oil from the Middle East. What the Chinese are trying to argue is, “See, if you push Iran into a corner, that’s what the Iranians are going to do.” They’re going to block the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Hormuz is so important, and we want it to stay open—we’ve been saying that—but the Iranians aren’t going to listen to that unless the United States and Israel stop their aggression against Iran. So I think that’s the diplomatic rhetoric game China is playing.

Actually, I would think that the Chinese government would want Iran to act very assertively, and even in some ways a little more aggressive, in its actions in the region—defending its own national security—while China and Russia would be playing the diplomatic game, trying to persuade more countries in Europe, and maybe Japan and South Korea, to realize the importance of pressuring the United States and Israel, if that’s possible. I mean, whether that’s doable is another thing. But I think that’s what they want to do: they want to play the diplomatic side to pressure those countries in the West, to sort of divide the Western camp, so that hopefully some countries in the West can try to pressure the United States to stop the invasion of Iran, or something similar to that.

#Pascal

Right. So when people said it’s weird that China is kind of just sitting back and letting things happen, and others were saying, “Oh no, China will intervene in favor of Iran,” I mean, neither of those is what’s happening. The Chinese are definitely watching this very, very closely and are definitely encouraging Iran to do more. On the other hand, they have no interest in being directly involved. But it must be a very interesting, instructive period for China, right? I mean, seeing again, for the second time in four years after the Ukraine war, how far a missile war can go. And of course, we’ve already seen part of that in the 12-day war.

But this time it becomes even clearer, because Iran is going after the United States directly across the entire region, right? So, do you think—or did you read—any kind of analysis from Chinese observers about what this tells us about the real strength of the U.S. military? The U.S. military is anything but a paper tiger, but it seems that by now, in week number three, it’s not the almighty “we can do whatever we want, whenever we please, and we’re invulnerable.” No, no, no—you’re very much vulnerable. And if you use asymmetric warfare, those vulnerabilities can be quite a bit exploited. Did you read anything about how China is trying to learn from this?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I've actually read a lot of articles and discussions over the last two or three weeks about this. I'd say the Chinese were not really surprised, but kind of glad to see that the U.S. is performing so badly right now. Because, you know, in the last few years, that's what the Chinese have been thinking. There are a lot of very serious military experts and researchers who specialize in these fields. Their argument is that the decline of U.S. superpower status is happening much faster than anyone expected—very, very quickly compared to history. If you look at historical superpowers, like how long Britain lasted as one, that was a very long time. But for the United States, I'd say its most powerful period was probably from 1991 to the early 2000s.

That was the peak of U.S. power. And right now, we're only less than 20 years from the Iraq War, but we can already see that the United States is no longer as powerful as it once was. In the last couple of years, the U.S. wasn't even able to take out the Houthi militia when the radical crisis happened. So the feeling is that, oh, the United States is definitely in decline. And with the U.S. kidnapping of Maduro, it's like the pro-U.S. voices started to re-emerge again, saying, "Oh, see, the United States is still able to kidnap important figures."

But with what the United States is doing to Iran right now, and how the Iranians are, I would say, very efficiently fighting back, it demonstrates to China that the Chinese analysis—that the United States is declining militarily—is not a wrong judgment. It's actually a very correct one. And it shows that maybe the United States is still able to carry out small, special-unit-type actions, like kidnappings around the world. But when it's fighting against a large power, even a regional power, it's not able to carry on a war as competently as it was 20 years ago.

#Pascal

Especially not on the other side of the globe. I mean, doing such an operation in the Caribbean, right next to Florida, is one thing, but doing it on the other side of the world, in Iran, is another. And of course, looking at China's position, that would give you a lot of insight into what a confrontation with the U.S. Navy would actually look like in the Pacific, right?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, yeah. And also, not even to mention China and Russia as those imaginary rivals the United States is always talking about in its potential military confrontations. But if you compare the size of the United States and Iran, the U.S. seems so powerful compared to Iran, of course. Yet what we're seeing right now is that even after they assassinated Soleimani, that didn't change the overall picture. Iran has been demonstrating a very efficient capacity to retaliate against the U.S. in the region, and the United States is not able to protect all those Arab Gulf monarchies that are its allies there.

The United States is not able to do that. And I also want to emphasize one thing: the significance of this war is going to be very profound. I'd say it has done something even more profound than the

Russian-Ukrainian war as a sign for our future. Since the early 2000s, there's been this sort of norm—something people don't talk about openly, but everyone kind of accepts—that a third country can provide a base to the United States, and the U.S. can use that base against another country, against its rivals in the region. And then the country hosting the United States can play the neutrality card, saying, "Oh, I'm neutral, I'm not picking sides."

This is just the United States using its bases, and you can't retaliate against me. And if you look at it, that's what happened with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example. Saddam was not able to say, "Oh, the U.S. is using bases in neighboring countries, so I'm going to strike those countries in retaliation." That's not what was happening. And so that established a kind of unconscious norm in international relations—somehow you can play the innocent card while the United States is using your territory as a base against another country. And right now, Iran is breaking that norm. And this is very profound.

Because by doing so, everyone would know that hosting U.S. military bases in your territory no longer means you can play that neutrality card. And if you look at how Iran retaliated, they not only bombed U.S. bases themselves but also hit some facilities—military facilities of those Arab Gulf monarchies as well. So inviting the United States into your country makes you a potential target of the country that's at war with the United States. And I'd say this is going to have a lot of significant—hopefully insightful—lessons for many countries hosting U.S. bases around the world, especially in East Asia or in Europe and places like that.

#Pascal

And we'll see—I mean, Iran is very clearly trying now to establish the fact that if you host U.S. bases, that will not increase your security; it will decrease it, because it will make you a target *de facto*, even if you complain about it, even if you pass Security Council resolutions about it. You'll still be a target. So, get rid of these bases. And actually, they say so. I talked to Mohamed Marandi from the University of Tehran, and he said, "We will not stop the war until the United States' assets are gone and out of the region." And if the Gulf monarchies understand this and actually push them out, then all the better. But even if not, they're just going to keep shooting until the assets are destroyed or otherwise withdrawn. So, the signal is very, very strong, as you're saying.

I do wonder whether this is setting off some alarm bells in the Philippines and in Japan. The Japanese are historically not very good at learning the right lessons at the right time—but let's put that aside. I have my criticisms on that one as well. But I think you're absolutely right: establishing this new norm—or rather, this fact—that if you host bases of an aggressive military alliance, you're actually making yourself a target of the other side. That should be the most straightforward thing in international relations, which is, in fact, the reason why the law of neutrality says that if you want to claim neutrality, you must not host bases or soldiers, and you must not help them build or harbor military capacity, right?

It's very simple—really simple. But that one is apparently changing now. So China is looking at it very closely. Are there other things we should know about to interpret Chinese actions? I know, for instance, that you're working on a paper exploring this relationship you mentioned at the beginning—being close to Iran as a BRICS member and so on, but at the same time maintaining close ties with the Gulf monarchies.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, so we can talk a little bit about that. I'd say it's my sort of critique of a limitation in Chinese foreign policy at this moment, because, as we know, Chinese foreign policy today is shaped by two different traditions from different eras. One is the Maoist tradition of the Mao Zedong period, whose legacy is this kind of anti-imperialist—especially anti-U.S. imperialist—tradition. And the other is the Dengist tradition, after the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. Deng Xiaoping left this very interesting doctrine, saying that diplomacy should serve the interests of the economy, not the other way around, right?

That's what the Chinese have been doing for the last 30 years or so—you'll find they've tried not to pick sides on most issues unless they're directly related to China itself. In China's engagement with many countries around the world, it's usually about promoting economic cooperation and trying to keep economic interests separate from political ones. So those two different traditions are both shaping Chinese policy today. And of course, they contradict each other quite a bit, which explains many of the inconsistencies in Chinese foreign policy. Our example right now is the Iran and Gulf countries situation.

If you look at how China sees Iran, Iran actually has a very unique strategic importance for China in the region, because Iran is, I would say, the only capable regional power that can challenge U.S. hegemony. Iran, along with its militias—the so-called axis of resistance—demonstrates that they are, so far, the only real challenger to U.S. dominance in the region. And for China, that's very important, because strategically they don't want to see the United States pulling out of the Middle East entirely and shifting its focus to East Asia, since that would create more strategic pressure on China.

What the Chinese want to see is the United States being tied down in different areas—one in Eastern Europe, one in East Asia, and one in the Middle East—so that U.S. power is more dispersed and it becomes much easier for regional or even global powers to break through the cage of U.S. containment. That's what the Chinese are thinking about. So Iran has this kind of strategic, political importance that no other country in the region has.

And that's something China has been thinking about, and it explains a lot about Chinese support for Iran. I would say that support is very concrete, because if you only look at the economy as the way to understand it, you'd never see why China keeps buying Iran's oil and everything else. They could have stopped doing that a long time ago, like Japan did. The Japanese used to buy oil from Iran, but

then they thought, "Oh, we might be sanctioned," so they gave it up. So Chinese trade with Iran is not merely an economic matter, but a more political and strategic decision to empower Iran. At the same time, what the Dengist tradition has left in Chinese foreign policy today is that a large portion of Chinese policymakers are still very focused on economic cooperation—this trade-oriented way of thinking.

And of course, if you compare the economic potential of Iran to the Gulf countries, the Gulf countries are much richer in terms of trade. So you find that, economically, China in the region is more closely connected to Iran's regional rivals, including the Gulf Arab countries—especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE—and also Israel before the Gaza war. During the Gaza war, China's diplomatic relationship with Israel ran into serious trouble. But from 2016 up to the Gaza war, that was the period when Netanyahu—who I'd say is very smart—managed to trick the Chinese into believing in investing in Israel, which they later regretted.

But during that time, the Chinese were basically tricked by Netanyahu into thinking it was safe to invest in Israel. So there was close trade with Israel as well. I'd say there's a contradiction—or a paradox—in Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East. Politically, China is more closely aligned with Iran, in what you could even call a kind of de facto, quasi-alliance relationship. But economically, we're very closely connected with the Gulf monarchies, and we used to be with Israel as well. That actually caused a lot of tension in China–Iran relations over the last few years. One of the biggest points of tension was in 2020, when China hosted something called the China–Gulf Cooperation Council, which...

#Sheng Zhang

It was the first one held in Riyadh. Xi Jinping went there and signed a statement in which China, somehow, recognized the UAE's claim of territory over the three islands—the ones disputed between Iran and the UAE. I don't know what the Chinese were thinking, but they did recognize that, and it caused a huge reaction from Iran. Iran summoned the Chinese ambassador in protest, and the Iranian conservative newspaper Kayhan—which is run by the more hardline, anti-US faction—reacted strongly. Its chief editor is believed to be personally close to Ayatollah Khamenei.

And that newspaper published a very harsh statement about it, literally calling out Xi Jinping by name. It said, "Mr. Xi Jinping, why are you doing this? If you think Iran doesn't have sovereignty over those three islands, would you feel the same if we didn't recognize Taiwan as part of China's territory?" Oh, wow. So it was a very strong statement. I think Xi Jinping had to send a special envoy to Iran to talk to them about it and somehow appease them. But the issue wasn't resolved. In 2024, the same thing happened again over the three islands. Somehow the Chinese were fine with the UAE claiming them, and that hurt a lot of nationalistic feelings in Iran. So I'd say that's a kind of contradiction in China's engagement in the region.

And another thing, importantly, is that China, as you know, is a one-party country. The party controls the gun, right? Not the gun controlling the party. That's how the Chinese understand politics. They believe that whoever is in the capital, whoever is in the government, should be able to control the government. So they made a mistake—I personally argue it's a mistake—that China has been developing relations only with the Iranian government, not with the Revolutionary Guard. And as you know, the Iranian government is very, I mean, the civil-servant faction of the Iranian government. And if we understand Iran's politics, they have this clergy class, and they have the Revolutionary Guard.

And then they have the civil-servant faction as well. So, three major factions that cooperate with each other, though they often have different opinions and interests. The civil servants are more soft-liners, while the Revolutionary Guard are more hard-liners in their relationship with the United States and the West. So I'd say the Chinese made a mistake by cultivating relations only with the civil government in Iran. As a result, the Chinese often got the impression that the Iranians wanted to negotiate with the United States not only about the nuclear issue but also other matters.

And then the Chinese believe that the Iranian government is very soft-line—soft-line in terms of its resistance against U.S. imperialism in the region. And I would say that contributed to, as we talked about at the beginning of the interview, the Chinese being a little bit too pessimistic about how Iran would retaliate to a U.S. invasion. It's because the people in Iran they have contact with are always those reformist or pro-West factions, right? And China doesn't really have close contact with the Revolutionary Guard, nor do they have any real contact with the pro-Iran militias in the region. If you look at China's relationship with Lebanon, it's always with the government in Beirut.

The Chinese don't have any real contact. Now, of course, sometimes they sell drones or other equipment to different factions. But diplomatically, they don't have a normalized, institutionalized channel of communication with those pro-Iranian militias—like, for example, Hezbollah or the Houthis. They always talk to the civil-servant government in Beirut, or to the so-called government-in-exile of the Yemeni regime in Riyadh. So the information they get is very different from the actual situation on the ground. And I'd say that's a real problem still haunting Chinese foreign policy in the region.

Yeah, so, as I mentioned—I wrote about this in an article that's coming out soon in a journal called **Asian Perspectives**, hosted by Johns Hopkins University and edited by the Center for Asian Studies at Koç University in Turkey. You'll be able to find the details once it's published. I'd say that's one of the biggest underlying problems—or limitations, however we want to call it—of Chinese diplomacy in the region. And if we understand that, we can see why China often uses diplomatic rhetoric that anti-imperialist thinkers around the world don't necessarily find interesting or satisfying.

#Pascal

No, but this is very interesting. This is really good insight. You know, we often make the mistake of interpreting China and Iran too much through this Western liberal framework of, "Oh, just an autocracy, a pyramid structure." And China is 100% under the rule of Xi Jinping—whatever he wills will happen. Or Iran is under the Ayatollah, right? That's just not how it works. They don't operate that way. And what you laid out is very useful if we think about the Maoist tradition and Deng's tradition, and how they're also in competition with each other, rolled out at the same time through different arms of these structures. So not everything is under one coherent, single system on either side.

And also the difficulty for China to adequately understand how Iran actually works. As you just laid out, there's this challenge, of course, in maintaining relationships with everyone who really matters—and even just having the right understanding. I mean, it shows that you can be very close neighbors and part of a BRICS club, and still be enigmas to each other, right? That's the environment that apparently shapes how they interact now. That's highly, highly useful to know. Maybe just to finish—what are your expectations for the Chinese-Iranian relationship, and maybe also the Chinese-Iranian-Russian trilateral relationship? Do you have any thoughts on what you'd expect to happen or to see in the near future?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think, just to add a little bit to what we talked about, not only does Iran have different factions, but China does too. There are more Dengist-minded people and more Maoist-minded people—they all exist in China, actually within the Chinese Communist Party as well. You'd find that, say, the people in Chinese state corporations, because they're doing business, often tend to be more economically driven, more in the Dengist way. Meanwhile, I'd say the military and those circles are more politically driven, more political in their thinking, and they tend to be more pro-Iran, while the people doing trade are not so much.

The state corporations are the ones doing most of the trade with Iran. They're more like softliners, and I'd say that probably gave the Iranians a bad impression of China as well. Just like we say the softliner faction in Iran gave China the impression that Iran isn't that serious or that anti-U.S. I'd guess that the softliner, "Dengist" factions—many of them from the state corporations—might have given the Iranians the feeling that China is very soft in this shared struggle against U.S. hegemony in the world. That's my sense. But with the current war, I feel like we're going to see something very different. So first, I imagine the Iranians will continue resisting.

Actually, I'm more optimistic than most people in China about this issue. I believe Iran is going to demonstrate to the rest of the world, including China, that it's very determined in this struggle against the U.S. invasion in the region. I'd expect China to realize that and to provide more diplomatic and maybe other kinds of support to Iran as well. Also, with the war in Ukraine already

going on, and now Iran being pushed into a corner as this new war begins, there's really no one left to take the pressure off China anymore, you know? So it's just a matter of time before the Chinese feel like they're being pushed into a corner too—one way or another.

#Pascal

Is it something in the air, like, "Okay, we're probably next"? Yeah, definitely.

#Sheng Zhang

That's what people believe. I'd say that in all three countries—Russia, Iran, and China—you can find both hardliners and softliners. The main difference, I'd argue, is that the softliners aren't people who think we should totally westernize, but rather those who argue that maybe, in other places, they'd go to war with the United States first so we'd have more time to prepare. You know, that kind of idea—like, "Oh, maybe we wait a little while, and Russia will have a conflict with the West first, so we'll have a few more years to build up our military."

I believe that many people in the Chinese, Russian, and Iranian governments—the softliner factions—were thinking about this triangular relationship before all those crises happened, right? But now what's happening is that the war is already pushing the softliner factions in Iran and Russia to diminish. And I'd expect the same thing to happen in China very soon—that the Chinese would feel like, "Oh, we're next. They're next. We're next." That's what I believe. And with the increasing pressure against China, I'd imagine that the hardliner faction will have more of a say in the Chinese domain as well. I'd argue this is a long-term trend that's going to continue.

And so we can expect a deeper, more genuine cooperation between China, Russia, and Iran in many areas. I'd imagine the Chinese and Russians would send some sort of support to Iran—diplomatic support for sure, but maybe also some kind of technological assistance or something like that. Maybe they're already doing it, since you can see that Iranian missiles are performing very well. They're either using the Russian satellite system or the Chinese one—I don't know which, but definitely one of those two, or maybe even both. So I'd expect that to continue, with these three countries getting closer and closer. And specifically regarding China's engagement in the region, I'd argue that this is definitely opening a new chapter in two major ways.

First, in terms of the Chinese perception—their thinking about the region—I feel like China right now is going through a stage of really trying to understand what Iran and its Axis of Resistance are doing there. This might sound a little crazy because this has been going on for more than ten years. But before this round, I'd say the Chinese were kind of aware that there were armed struggles in the region and that Iran had strong anti-U.S. sentiments, but they didn't really grasp how serious the Iranians were in those situations. Because, as you can see, Iran sort of waited until the last moment over the past two years in the struggle between the Axis of Resistance and Israel.

It was the war in Gaza that started first, and then the Houthis joined in, Hezbollah joined in, and Iran was the last entity to enter. Iran in the Middle East is a bit like what China is globally—it's like, okay, the last one to be pushed into this, but it's understood that it has to. So the Chinese started to—before that, they were thinking maybe this war was on a limited scale, maybe it wouldn't turn into a massive regional war. But with the U.S. and Israeli invasion of Iran right now, this year, and Iran's resistance to it, I think this is an eye-opening moment that's forcing the Chinese to really see what's going on in the region. It's also helping, I'd say, the more pro-Iran voices within the Chinese government to have more influence on policy toward the region.

While the more pro-Gulf or pro-Israeli voices might be diminishing, that's one aspect of how the Chinese are thinking about the region. The second thing is that, outside of the Chinese perspective, I feel that with the new leadership in Iran, I expect them to be able to draw the Chinese into the situation more cleverly than the previous government. Let me explain what I mean. As we know, Ayatollah Khamenei, like his predecessor, was a relatively moderate thinker compared to Khomeini and many of the commanders of the revolutionary government.

He was trying to find a balanced approach between the hardliners and the softliners. And he really cares about the international image of Iran as well. That's why he was very much against the nuclear program, and he was cautious about how friendly countries like China and Russia see Iran and that sort of thing. So, in the diplomatic relationship between China and Iran, it's a very gentleman-like, old-protocol kind of diplomacy—more elegant in a way. But I would imagine that, as the new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei came into place...

We understand that he's more influenced by the Revolutionary Guard. And it's probably that Iran, after this war—after how the United States and Israel have caused damage to it—I would imagine Iran's policy will be more hard-core oriented. Blocking the Strait of Hormuz is part of that. Right. And blocking the Strait of Hormuz while at the same time sending out signals that ships using Chinese yuan would be allowed to pass is actually a way of dragging China into this. Whether the Chinese want it or not... of course, there will be people in China who are more moderate-thinking, people who feel uncomfortable about this.

But I think overall it's a good thing if the Iranians can find smart ways to draw China into being more engaged in the region. That would actually help China move in a direction that supports the construction of a multipolar world and promotes more anti-imperialist structures globally. So that's what I'm expecting to happen. And yeah, I don't think it's a bad thing. I think sometimes, you know, those hardline factions in each country probably have to find ways to pull each other into the conversation so they can come up with some kind of larger plan together.

#Pascal

I think that's a very, very clever analysis of yours. But it also shows why, especially the soft-liners or the more trade-oriented people in China, now have every reason to say, "Let's be careful, let's be

careful, let's just look at what they did." They say they want to use our currency without our consent—they just do that. I mean, let's be careful. And the other ones are probably now like, "Yay, let's go and support," and whatnot. But you see how this game is happening on several levels, and not necessarily with the consent of everyone. So this was a very, very cogent explanation of the whole situation. Thank you very much, Sheng. People who want to read more from you—is there a specific place where they can go and find your writings?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, for the China-Iran article, it's going to be published soon—maybe in about two months or so—by the **Journal of Asian Perspective**. So if you want to see that, you can find it. I've also written before about China's response to Gaza, which we talked about in the last video, I think. Yeah, so if I write something similar to this, I'll mention it next time.

#Pascal

Okay, and I'll see if I can link to some of your work in the description of this video below. Sheng Tan, thank you very much for your time today.

#Sheng Zhang

Thank you very much.