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## **China and the Danger of a US–Iran War**

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The five-year multilateral diplomatic struggle to rein in Iran's nuclear programme and the broader psychological war against the Islamic regime have been overshadowed for most of 2011 by the turmoil of the 'Arab Spring'. Yet as new unilateral Western sanctions threaten full-scale economic war and as the rhetoric of Israeli or US military action against Iran escalates, the crisis has now taken centre stage in world politics. So far China, together with Russia, holds off UN sanctions and advocates dialogue and diplomatic negotiations to prevent further escalation. However, should the threat of war continue to grow, China may be forced to play a more prominent role.

### **Escalating Tensions**

The defining opening move in the current phase of escalating tensions was the publication in November 2011 of a new report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iran's progress towards a nuclear device. Iran had allegedly engaged in computer modelling of a nuclear warhead, testing explosives in a large metal chamber and studying how to arm a Shahab 3 medium-range missile with an atomic warhead. However, the report was considered too unsubstantial by China and Russia to justify additional sanctions. Western analysts agreed that the report did not constitute a 'smoking gun', proving conclusively that Iran is 'close to making a nuclear weapon'. The IAEA Board adopted only a soft resolution on 20 November 2011, which Iran ignored. China and Russia used their weight at the UN Security Council to block broader sanctions.

After more than a year of intermittent warnings by various Israeli politicians that Israel would 'launch a military strike' against Iran's nuclear facilities, which was ambiguously seconded by US President Obama with the cliché 'that all options are on the table', Iran was by year's end increasingly under siege. A large-scale air-force offensive may be looming or not, but the bombing of a missile base, assassination of nuclear scientists, sabotage of centrifuges and the recent downing of an American spy drone reveal that Israel and the United States have been waging a secret low-intensity war against Iran for some time.

If this clandestine campaign has elicited any response from the Iranian regime, it is further radicalization of the hardliners and undermining of the moderates, as highlighted by the recent storming of the British Embassy in Tehran, following British-led moves to cut off the Iranian central bank from the global financial system, which is tantamount to economic war.

### **Beijing's Balancing Act**

China has been cooperative with the West since the first wave of UN sanctions in 2006, but has consistently opposed additional unilateral Western sanctions, which it considers violations of international law. Since there has never been conclusive evidence that Iran is engaged in a coordinated programme to develop nuclear weapons, China is still giving Iran the benefit of the doubt,

while berating Tehran to do more to convince the international community of the peaceful intent of its purported civilian nuclear programme. However, there is speculation among strategic thinkers in the United States that China may secretly welcome a nuclear Iran, as this might shift the United States' attention away from the Pacific back to the Persian Gulf and Middle East. Some Chinese analysts muse that the nuclear issue is just a cloak for the real US–Israeli goal: regime change.

Still, to avoid confrontation with the United States, China told its state oil majors earlier this year to stop further expansion in Iran so as not to jeopardize its investment prospects in the United States. One Beijing think tank linked Iran with the South China Sea, over most of which China claims sovereignty, and envisioned an accommodation with the United States under which Washington would slow down its much publicized reassertiveness in East Asia, especially its budding rapprochement with Vietnam. China would in exchange downgrade its interests in Iran. But it did not work out that way. The United States has returned to East Asia as a resurgent superpower after the hibernation of the Bush years and is flexing its muscles even more in the Persian Gulf.

In mid-December 2011, China's non-state telecom giant Huawei Technologies announced that it would voluntarily restrict its expansion in Iran because of the 'increasingly complex situation there'. The underlying reason: Huawei was facing scrutiny in the United States over its supply of mobile network technology to Tehran to track down dissidents.

## **A More Prominent Role in Global Politics**

China asserts that it has taken a variety of actions to calm the situation, while the Chinese media are taking the Anglo-American axis to task for ratcheting up tensions with new crippling sanctions, a dirty war inside Iran, and possible moves towards open military action, which will threaten regional peace and severely damage China's economy. They implore China and Russia to block this, without saying how.

It is difficult to imagine that President Obama would yield to the clamour in toxic US election politics to launch another war. But if the United States inadvertently drifts into a war with Iran, following a possible Israeli military adventure, what would China do? In such a scenario it is quite obvious that Beijing would decide to abandon its reluctant stance and resort to a more forceful diplomatic approach at regional and global multilateral institutions, in order to stimulate the relevant parties to look for options other than war. China could coordinate its moves not only with Russia but also with Japan and India, the two other Asian great powers that are major importers of Iranian oil and gas. The danger of a US–Iran war could well draw China into a more prominent role in global politics.

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