



China-Iran Fact Sheet

A Short Primer on the Relationship

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Key Takeaways

- » Last year the Commission identified the relationship between China and Iran as part of an informal “**Axis of Autocracy**.” China helps Iran evade U.S. sanctions and maintain its destabilizing activities in the Middle East. Iran supplies China with relatively low-cost oil and is a partner in China’s efforts to undermine the U.S.-led global order, including through alternative multilateral organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).
- » Although Tehran has sought deeper strategic alignment, **China has avoided formal defense commitments to Iran and is not likely to take significant action to support Iran** beyond providing diplomatic support and dual-use supplies. China and Iran bilateral defense engagements have been limited in recent years, while both participate in joint exercises in trilateral (with Russia) and multilateral settings (including the SCO). Reports indicate that after U.S. strikes began, China allowed two state-owned Iranian vessels in a Chinese port to be loaded with sodium perchlorate, which is used in solid rocket fuel for missiles.
- » **China is Iran’s largest trading partner and the primary buyer of Iranian oil.** Chinese purchases account for roughly 90 percent of Iran’s exported oil, providing tens of billions of dollars in annual revenue that supports Iran’s government budget and military activities. Beijing and Tehran signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership agreement” in 2021 covering economic, security, and technological cooperation over a 25-year period.

- » **China enables Iran to mitigate global sanctions through trade and financial networks, technology transfers, and dual-use trade.** Chinese banks, front companies, and intermediary firms facilitate oil transactions, the shadow fleet that transports Iranian oil, access to controlled technologies that support Iran's missile and drone programs, and money laundering that enables it all.
- » Despite the expanding partnership, **the relationship remains asymmetric.** Iran depends heavily on China for energy export revenue and diplomatic backing, while **Beijing maintains a cautious approach to avoid jeopardizing relations with other Middle Eastern partners** such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). **As of publication, Beijing has limited its official support for Iran after U.S. and Israeli strikes to diplomatic statements** characterizing the actions as violations of international law, condemning the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and calling for immediate cessation of attacks and the reopening of dialogue.

Strategic Relations

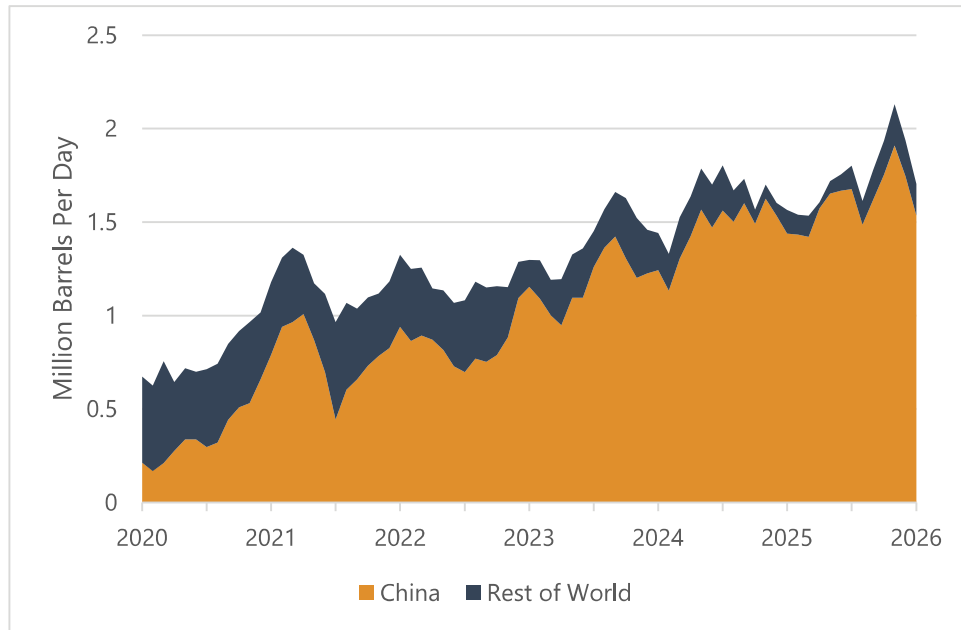
- **China's relationship with Iran has evolved over decades from limited cooperation to a broad strategic partnership** encompassing economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions, **much of which runs directly counter to U.S. foreign policy and national security interests.** China views Iran as a partner in balancing U.S. influence in the Middle East and seeking to erode the U.S.-led global order, and as a key supplier of discounted energy resources.
- **China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea are increasingly resembling an informal Axis of Autocracy.** Brought together by a shared desire to challenge U.S. global leadership and reshape elements of the international system to be more conducive to authoritarian forms of government, this partnership emboldens each actor to take more provocative actions, believing that mutual support will help them withstand the consequences. (For more, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "[Axis of Autocracy: China's Revisionist Ambitions with Russia, Iran, and North Korea](#)," in *2025 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2025.)
- Beijing has **expressed opposition to Iran developing nuclear weapons** and has supported diplomatic frameworks such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). China has supported Iran's right to a civilian nuclear energy program.¹ Over the past two decades, open-source reporting does not indicate that China has directly helped Iran's nuclear weapons program. Rather, most allegations against China have focused on dual-use technology transfers, missile-related materials, or sanctions evasion rather than direct nuclear weapons assistance.²
- **China has helped ease Iran's international isolation by facilitating its entrance into alternative multilateral institutions including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2023 and BRICS in 2024.**³ Membership in these organizations brings Iran into closer alignment with China and Russia and helps China's goal of using them to promote illiberal norms, help mitigate the impact of sanctions tools, and coordinate on security issues. Following the United States and Israel's bombings of Iran in 2025, BRICS issued a statement expressing "grave concern" but has not taken a stance on the recent strikes, reflecting limitations to the group's cohesion.⁴
- **To date, Beijing has limited its official support for Iran after U.S. and Israeli strikes to diplomatic statements.** China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its permanent representative to the UN

have stated that strikes on Iran are violations of international law, condemned the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and called for immediate cessation of military operations and the reopening of dialogue.⁵ While Beijing has not explicitly made a statement on Iran's attacks on the Gulf states, China has condemned "indiscriminate attacks against civilians and non-military targets."⁶ In a call with his Iranian counterpart, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi both reiterated China's support for Iran's sovereignty and expressed confidence that Iran will "pay attention to the legitimate concerns of its neighbors."⁷ Beijing has avoided overt aid or direct military support for Iran, following its playbook for responding to other recent international conflicts involving partners like Russia and Venezuela.⁸

Security Cooperation

- China was a major supplier of conventional weapons to Iran in the 1980s but largely stopped transfers in 2015 after UN Security Council Resolution 2231 increased international scrutiny of such transfers.⁹ In recent years, security cooperation has shifted toward **dual-use technology sales and transfers of defense-related technologies**, including those relevant to missile and drone development.¹⁰ Chinese components—including sensors, voltage converters, and semiconductors—have been found in Iranian drones, both the drones used by its regional proxies and those exported to Russia for use in Ukraine.¹¹
- In the days leading up to the U.S. and Israeli strikes in February 2026, **several anonymously sourced reports indicated China was engaged in direct arms sales to Iran--offensive drones and a nearly finalized deal to sell anti-ship cruise missiles, though the two sides had not agreed on a delivery date.**¹² If confirmed, these reports could indicate a shift toward a less restrained Chinese approach to providing Iran with kinetic military capabilities. Reports indicate that China has allowed sales of a component of rocket fuel to Iran. During the week of March 2, 2026, **two state-owned Iranian vessels departed China's Gaolan Port to Iran and are believed to be transporting sodium perchlorate**, a key precursor used in solid rocket fuel for missiles.¹³ This follows a similar incident in January 2025, when two different Iranian ships docked in China and were loaded with approximately 1,000 tons of sodium perchlorate.¹⁴
- **In 2021, China gave Iran full military access to its BeiDou satellite navigation system.**¹⁵ It is not clear, however, the extent to which Iran's military resources use BeiDou or U.S.-controlled GPS.¹⁶ While plausible that Iran is currently relying on BeiDou for its drone and missile attacks throughout the Middle East, and *Al Jazeera* has cited experts who believe this to be the case, open-source evidence does not yet allow for a definitive assessment.¹⁷
- At the same time, **China has avoided formal defense commitments to Iran**, underscoring the asymmetric nature of the relationship. Tehran seeks deeper strategic alignment, while Beijing prioritizes balancing relations with other Middle Eastern partners and limiting security entanglements.
- **China's direct military engagements with Iran occur primarily through trilateral or multilateral activities.** Purely bilateral defense engagements between China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Iran occur infrequently, with the last bilateral meeting occurring in 2022.¹⁸ Instead, the PLA has participated in regular trilateral and multilateral military activities involving Iran, including an annual joint naval exercise between China, Iran, and Russia first held in 2019.¹⁹ While reporting on February 17, 2026, indicated that the 2026 iteration of the exercise would be held in the Strait of Hormuz, it appears China did not join Iran and Russia this year.²⁰
- **China and Iran have used the SCO and BRICS to deepen military cooperation.** Iran hosted China and other members for an SCO military exercise in December 2025.²¹ In January 2026, Iran intended to participate in a China-led joint naval exercise with BRICS Plus countries, including Russia, South Africa, the UAE, and other observers. The host of the exercise, South Africa, called on Iran to withdraw from the event and apparently it pulled out.²²

Figure: Iranian Crude Oil Export Destination (Three-Month Moving Average), January 2020–January 2026



Note: This source estimates exports and ship-to-ship transfers of Iranian oil and gas condensate using the automatic identification system (AIS), satellite imagery, vessel comparison and tanker classification, and cargo datasets.

Source: United Against Nuclear Iran, "Iran Tanker Tracker."

Trade and Investment

- China is Iran's largest trading partner** and maintains substantial commercial ties despite U.S. and multilateral sanctions on Tehran. China reported \$9.96 billion in total bilateral trade with Iran in 2025.²³ However, this does not include roughly \$31.2 billion* in unreported Iranian crude oil exports to China in 2025, which if included comprise over 75 percent of total bilateral trade.²⁴
- In 2021, **China pledged up to \$400 billion in investment over 25 years as part of a comprehensive strategic partnership** agreement with Iran.²⁵ In the years since, little investment has been actualized due to Chinese companies' hesitancy stemming from sanctions.²⁶ However, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in October 2025 on an oil-for-
- infrastructure arrangement involving Chinese state-owned enterprise Sinosure that may have secretly facilitated up to \$8.4 billion worth of investment in 2024.²⁷
- Given China's extensive economic interests across the Middle East, **Beijing balances its support for Iran with other critical trade and investment partners in the region.** In 2025, China registered \$108 billion in two-way trade with Saudi Arabia and \$108 billion with the UAE, compared to \$41.2 billion with Iran (including unreported oil imports).²⁸ Arab Gulf countries also present far greater investment, technology, and market access opportunities for Chinese companies than Iran.

* This figure assumes an average discount of \$9 per barrel below the 2025 global benchmark average \$69 per barrel on an estimated 520 million barrels of crude oil exported from Iran to China in 2025.

Oil and Gas

- **Iran has the third-largest proven crude oil reserves and sits atop the world's largest natural gas field**, which it shares with Qatar.²⁹ Sanctions have limited development of liquified natural gas (LNG) export infrastructure, but Iran remains among the world's top exporters of crude oil, with total production capacity of 3.8 million barrels per day (bpd).³⁰
- **China is by far the largest buyer of Iranian crude oil, purchasing upward of 90 percent** (see Figure 1), often at a steep discount of \$8–10 per barrel.³¹ In 2025 China imported almost 1.4 million bpd of Iranian oil, which accounted for about 12 percent of its total crude imports.³²
- China's purchases of Iranian oil translates to tens of billions of dollars in revenue for Tehran annually (~\$31.2 billion in 2025), even with the discount. **Oil revenue from China accounts for about 45 percent of Iran's government budget, money that in turn funds Iran's destabilizing activity throughout the region.**³³
- **China is highly dependent on seaborne oil imports but has been actively preparing for a supply shock.** China relies on seaborne imports for over 63 percent of its oil needs, and half of China's imports flow through the Strait of Hormuz.³⁴ China has ensured a diversified and flexible supply of oil (beyond the 22 percent it receives from Iran, Russia, and Venezuela combined) to avoid becoming overly reliant on tenuous sources.³⁵ China has significantly increased its crude oil storage and stockpile capacity, with one estimate indicating it could meet its core needs for two to four years if cut off completely from seaborne imports, with aggressive rationing and increased overland pipeline utilization.³⁶ Notably, there has been a marked increase in the amount of seaborne oil from both Iran and Venezuela aboard tankers anchored in China's coastal waters coinciding with the runup to U.S. military action.³⁷ The almost 40 million barrels in "floating storage" could provide a buffer if there is a prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz.³⁸

- **On March 12, 2026, Chinese authorities halted exports of refined oil products that had not yet cleared customs, indicating growing trepidation about disruptions from the Gulf.**³⁹ Of the 15 ships that had transited the Strait of Hormuz as of March 10, most were shadow fleet vessels transporting Iranian oil, meaning there had been no decrease in Iran's oil exports.⁴⁰ Some ships attempting to transit the Strait of Hormuz are claiming to have Chinese crews in an effort to dissuade Iranian attacks.⁴¹

Sanctions Evasion

- **Iran is subject to a broad range of both U.S. and global sanctions** aiming to deter further development of its nuclear and missile programs and penalize its role in international terrorism, regional aggression, and human rights abuses.⁴² UN sanctions lifted as part of the 2015 JCPOA were reimposed in September 2025 after France, Germany, and the UK invoked a snapback mechanism due to Iran's "significant non-performance" of its commitments under the agreement.⁴³ Despite its original participation in the JCPOA, China opposed the snapback provision.⁴⁴
- **Chinese entities are involved in multiple steps of a complex enterprise to import Iranian oil and facilitate payment.** As mentioned above, Chinese customs authorities do not officially report Iranian oil imports but rather falsely attribute origin to other countries, mostly Malaysia, Oman, and the UAE. The oil is transported on aging "shadow fleet" tankers that obfuscate their activity by using foreign flags, turning off AIS transponders, geo-spoofing, and making ship-to-ship transfers.⁴⁵ Most of the oil is processed by a cluster of independent "teapot" refineries largely cordoned off from the international financial system to minimize their exposure to sanctions.⁴⁶
- **China enables Iran's access to export-controlled dual-use technology necessary for Iran's drone and weapons programs.** China facilitates export control evasion for Iran through networks of transshipment and shell companies in Hong Kong, China, and third-party countries.⁴⁷ These obfuscation

tactics are used to provide dual-use components for Iranian drone and missile programs. As of November 13, 2025, 366 China and Hong Kong-based entities were on the Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List for Iran-related sanctions programs. Over 100 Chinese and Hong Kong entities have been added to the Entity List for assisting Iran's export control evasion efforts in the last eight years.⁴⁸

- **China and Hong Kong play a critical role in facilitating payment for sanctioned Iranian activity.** A network of front companies and small regional banks facilitate payment using false addresses and fake invoices, often via Hong Kong.⁴⁹ Iran uses a complex web of financial institutions to launder most of the renminbi (RMB) proceeds from its oil

sales into the global financial system.⁵⁰ Key nodes of this shadow banking system include the financial arms of Iranian oil companies, local Iranian money exchanges, and front companies overseas affiliated with Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) used to access foreign bank accounts, many of which are under Chinese jurisdiction.⁵¹ These offshore accounts and assets are used in part to finance the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hizballah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis, and other Iran aligned militia groups.⁵² For more on China's role in sanctions evasion, see Graham Ayres and Lyndi Tsering, "[China's Facilitation of Sanctions and Export Control Evasion](#)," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, November 14, 2025.

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