

Iran and China Are Strengthening Their Military Ties

by [Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

Nov 22, 2016

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Farzin Nadimi \(/experts/farzin-nadimi\)](/experts/farzin-nadimi)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.



Brief Analysis

Amid uncertainties about the incoming U.S. administration's approach to the Middle East and the nuclear deal, Tehran and Beijing appear to be entering a new era in their strategic partnership, including the potential transfer of advanced weapon systems down the road.

Last week, Chinese defense minister Chang Wanquan concluded a three-day trip to Tehran, the latest in a series of high-ranking bilateral military exchanges over the past two years. Previously, during a January visit by President Xi Jinping, the two countries signed a twenty-five-year strategic cooperation agreement that included a call for much closer defense and intelligence ties. The [June appointment \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-irans-new-armed-forces-chief-of-staff\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-irans-new-armed-forces-chief-of-staff) of Maj. Gen. Mohammad Hossein Bagheri as Iran's Armed Forces General Staff chairman is expected to expedite that process.

Military relations between the two countries date back to the early 1980s, but they went through a period of reduced cooperation as a result of international nuclear sanctions on Tehran. Today, they are once again poised to revive a relationship that could have considerable geopolitical implications for the region. The Chinese defense minister called the latest meetings a "turning point" in the strategic partnership, while Iran has continued to present itself as Beijing's only reliable oil supplier.

Regarding specific initiatives, defense officials reportedly discussed expanding China's use of Iranian air bases and naval facilities in the Persian Gulf, ostensibly for training and logistical purposes. They also agreed to exchange their hands-on military experience, mentioning examples such as facing the U.S. military at sea and in the air.

OTHER SIGNS OF COOPERATION

A part from last week's meetings, rumors persist that Iran is interested in acquiring Chinese Chengdu J-10B third-generation fighter jets as well as airborne radar and avionic sets to equip its own future designs. Last year, Iranian air force commander Gen. Hassan Shah-Safi was warmly welcomed in China, where he toured several aircraft factories and air bases.

Similarly, the Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle industry can learn a lot from China, as Beijing continues to unveil an array of increasingly capable drones. Tehran might seek Chinese help in jointly developing tactics such as "drone swarming" to add a new dimension to its asymmetrical way of warfare. Beijing could also help improve Iranian UAV guidance systems with satellite navigation and communication links. In October 2015, Iranian electronic defense firm SaIran signed an agreement with Chinese firms to begin using their BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system for military purposes. The system's military-grade signals are more accurate than commercially available GPS services, so they could significantly improve Iran's use of satellite navigation in its missiles, UAVs, and other hardware.

POTENTIAL NAVAL, MISSILE, AND ARMOR ACQUISITIONS

In October 2014, Iranian naval commander Adm. Habibollah Sayyari visited China to ask for help in overhauling and modernizing the Islamic Republic's submarine and surface fleets. He also discussed possible purchases of a wide range of Chinese naval equipment, including frigates, submarines, and missiles. Through various public statements and actions, the Iranian navy has shown its desire to become a major "blue water" power in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and China can help meet that goal by offering intelligence and training in the short term, and modern vessels and weapons systems down the road -- perhaps after UN military sanctions are lifted in late 2020, if not sooner (see the next section for more on these legal restrictions).

Several existing Chinese systems would suit Iran's need for a flexible navy capable of operating in both littoral and blue water, including the Type 052 destroyer, the C-28A corvette (armed with four C-802 antiship missiles and the HQ-7 surface-to-air missile system), the Type 054A frigate (which even Russia has considered buying), the Type 057 frigate (armed with state-of-the-art weapons systems), the P-18 export frigate (with a point-defense missile system and four C-803 antiship missiles), and the missile-armed semi-stealth corvette built by Wuchang Shipyard. Tehran might also try to expand its antiaccess/area denial (A2AD) reach by obtaining China's much-vaunted Type-022 stealth fast-attack missile catamarans, sometimes described as "carrier killers." These cost-effective warships could enable Iran to perform more effective patrol missions at longer ranges for longer periods of time.

In addition, notwithstanding current sanctions, China has a long history of cooperating with Iran on various antiship missile projects, covering ranges from 35 to over 300 kilometers. Such cooperation could bring Iran's capabilities to a new level if Beijing transfers any of its later generations of supersonic missiles such as the CM-302 and CX-1 (which can reach 290 and 280 kilometers, respectively, and are designed to target carrier battle groups with their advanced seekers) or the YJ-22 (the land-attack version of the C-802, with a 400 kilometer range). These weapons are ideal for denying access to the Persian Gulf. Iran recently spoke of fielding supersonic missiles for A2AD purposes, but it is not known to have developed such a capability itself.

The Iranian navy could also use Chinese (and Russian) technologies to equip and modernize its own ship designs. Tehran tends to prefer self-sufficiency and domestic R&D in building up its fleet, but so far its domestically produced vessels have been based on outdated designs that lack advanced equipment such as effective multilayer air-defense systems. This has forced the navy to reuse old systems from retired ships. Given the expansion in Chinese cooperation and Tehran's desire to sustain a viable shipbuilding industry, the Iranians could decide to abandon their recycled systems and look for modern Chinese hardware (e.g., the FL-3000N/HHQ-10 close-in air and missile defense system) to add more teeth to their warship designs.

The Iranian navy has likewise been developing three different midsize submarines for many years, and frequent

delays in their production could point to problems with systems integration and reliability. It might therefore seek to acquire customized Chinese submarines such as a Yuan-class vessel equipped with air-independent propulsion (AIP), a quieter system compared to the Russian-made Kilo-class submarines currently in Iran's service. China offers an advanced yet cost-effective AIP-equipped Type 039A version of the Yuan for export, as well as the improved Type 039C and the smaller S20 (which Pakistan has sought to acquire). If Iran chooses to pursue the "strategic partnership model" outlined recently by Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan and General Staff chairman Bagheri, it could look to combine Russian single-hull submarine designs and Chinese AIP technology to optimize its own submarine development.

Chinese submarines can also launch up to ten cruise missiles, which in Iran's service could include the Soumar, a copy of the Russian Kh-55 with a theoretical range of 2,500 kilometers -- assuming the national navy is able, and allowed, to use them on submarines. While it is by no means certain that Iran will be able to deploy the Soumar operationally anytime soon, such a development would give its navy a credible land-attack capability. Alternatively, Tehran might seek to arm its subs with the Chinese CM-708UNB antiship missile, which has a 290 kilometer range.

Another area to watch is land warfare. Ties with Beijing could give Iran the opportunity to examine, purchase, or even assemble modern Chinese tank designs such as the MBT 2000 or the highly developed MBT 3000 (VT-4); this also applies to modern armored personnel carriers, which Iran has yet to develop indigenously.

INTERNATIONAL OBSTACLES

When UN Security Council Resolution 2231 was implemented in January, it required all member states to seek the council's approval before selling any warships, combat aircraft, missile systems, or tanks to Iran for a period of five years. Once that period expires, there will be no restrictions on Iran's purchase of military hardware from countries like China.

In the meantime, Tehran hopes to hedge against outside interference by aligning itself more closely with a world power like China, which Iranians often perceive as a more reliable strategic partner than Russia. Iran has yet to be admitted to the Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member, so the deeper military cooperation that comes with membership remains just out of reach for now. But the recent high-level meetings with China suggest that may soon change. Moreover, expanding oil industry cooperation between the two countries could allow Iran to pay for major new weapons purchases with oil.

CONCLUSION

Recent reports in the semiofficial Iranian media outlet Fars News have emphasized Tehran's strong interest in expanding its naval reach as far as the western expanses of the Atlantic Ocean. Yet its current equipment would hardly allow for a sustainable and meaningful presence there, so Iranian officials seem to be placing particularly high priority on expanding naval cooperation with China. As a result, one can expect increasing naval exchanges and joint maneuvers, and perhaps even future exchanges of temporary basing facilities. Iran also seems keen on creating a missile-firing submarine fleet -- probably using Chinese help -- in order to counter Israel's expanding strategic submarine fleet. Yet unlike the high-profile Iranian arms deals with Russia, any such agreements with China can be expected to remain highly classified for some time to come.

More broadly, while Tehran's defense pact with Beijing has been presented as operationally focused, it could ultimately pave the way for more strategic cooperation. This includes Iranian acquisition of advanced weaponry from China after current restrictions are lifted in a few years, as well as upgrades to Iran's existing systems, both of which would complement their joint training efforts and military maneuvers. To be sure, China can be expected to assume a more cautious stance than Russia, which has directly intervened in the region on behalf of Tehran's Syrian client and is cooperating with Iran-aligned forces on the ground. Yet Beijing is more than willing to offer Iran

broader strategic partnership, potent conventional weaponry, and new technologies. Together with Iran's significant indigenous military industries, even limited Chinese assistance could substantially improve the Islamic Republic's regional military posture in the medium to long term.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖

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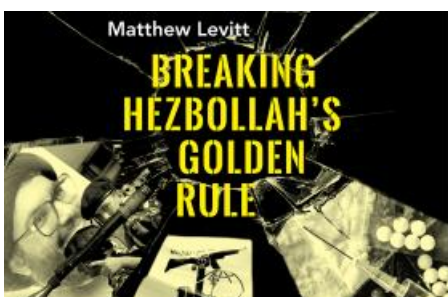
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