

Reflections and Prospects of China-Iran Relations under the Impact of COVID-19

Zheng He*

Institute of Problem Solving, Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, Yanta Street, Xi'an, China

sh_fff@163.com

**corresponding author*

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Abstract: The Corona virus causes major changes in the world, among which China-Iran relation is to change more or less under the influence. The worsened relations with the US of both countries are expected to push the two countries to have a more intimate friendship; the bilateral cooperation and the common interests of both countries also demonstrate a bright future. On the other hand, with the impediment of the second outbreak of the virus, the uncertainty of Iranian attitudes, and the impact of other countries, the improvement of the bilateral interactions is not all plain sailing. The essay aims to give analyses on these factors as well as some reasonable predictions.

1. Introduction

China has good ties with Iran, with a long and profound history of peace and friendship, contributing to a favourably historical and emotional factor to the China-Iran relations. In modern history, Iran is a staunch advocate of Chinese territorial integrity in frontier region. With the building of the Belt and Road, the further improvement of China-Iran relations is highly valued.

2. Opportunities

2.1. The Soured Iran-US and Sino-US Relations

The Iran-US relations started to strain after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, as Iran shifted to the doctrine of Anti-Americanism which was highlighted by the seizing of the US Embassy. America released economic and military sanctions against Iran afterwards. The confrontation was then upgraded in May, 2018, when the Trump government unilaterally withdrew the Iranian Nuclear Agreement. According to Rowhani, the American sanction has caused around 2,000 dollars economic loss to Iran from 2018 to 2020 [1].

January in 2020 witnessed an escalation of the tense. It is believed that the US targeted assassinated Qassim Soleimani, one of Iran's top generals, and several US military bases were attacked a few days later. As the assassination stimulates strong grudges against America among Iranian people, the incident has left a profound impediment in a warmer relationship with the US.

The period when the Sino-US relations have worsened coincides with the duration of the unilateral sanctions. Since Donald Trump took his presidency, China and America experienced a short period of “honeymoon”. But the year of 2018 witnessed a number of increased bilateral trade disputes and the US government started wagging and escalating a trade war. More hostile confrontational approach to China has been then adopted. As Diao has concluded, the Trump government have integrated sources as economy, diplomacy, intelligence, judiciary, military and etc. and shaped programs and policies to counter their “China threats” [2].

More importantly, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the rapidly deteriorated Sino-US relations have stimulated an open confrontation between the two powers.

One major reason of the rapid deterioration is that the Washington is making China a scapegoat of their dereliction of duty, whilst it is in fact the Trump government whom to blame for its domestic prevalence. Comparing to the timely and efficient measures by Chinese government and the understanding and supports of Chinese people, the American society appeared uninterested in the pandemic and downplayed the significance of necessary actions. Early in the outbreak, mass testing was failed to carry out throughout the country, and health care workers and the public were even in the shortage of basic protective equipment. In April, there were large demonstrations against the stay-at-home measures among several cities; a great number of American people refused to wear a mask, taking it as a political tool. Consequently, there was the severe outbreak.

However, after the pandemic out of control, the White House has consistently confronted China in speeches and media for not informing the US the virus. Evidences prove the opposite. As shown on the document of the Federal Register released on February 12th, the US government had been informed of and updated with the information long before the prevalence in America.¹ (Around March 26th, the confirmed cases in the US surpassed the number of China [4].) Moreover, methods preventing the possible spread from China were soon taken into act. As shown on a document of the Federal Register, on January 30, 2020, the U.S. Department of State issued a “Level 4: Do Not Travel” travel advisory for China, its highest level of caution over the rapidly spreading virus [5]. And on January 31st, the DHS (Department of Homeland Security) announced its decision on airline restrictions and arranged the routes for the withdrawal of Americans [6].

Another reason of the framing is that the Trump government are externalizing its domestic conflicts, trying to escape from domestic discontent and harsh criticism, in order to serve for Trump’s presidential election in November. As he has been inciting Americans against China, the sentiment of nationalism is raised which brings him approvals in his actions against China and thus more voters in referendum.

Trump does cause a series of bilateral frictions indeed. Economically, Trump government have started the trade disputes, placing tariffs on Chinese products, expelling a list of Chinese enterprises, Huawei, iflytec, ByteDance and Tencent for instance, and restricting exports of capital and technology-intensive products to China, and etc. Politically, the US demanded China to close the Chinese Consulate General in Houston unilaterally on July 21st [7].

In the author’s prediction, the tension is hard to ease in the near future, as the confrontation is caused by economy, political, and diplomacy factors.

¹ “On December 31st, 2019, the People's Republic of China (China) notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of pneumonia cases of an unknown cause in Wuhan, China ... on January 30th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the 2019-nCoV virus [COVID-19] in China a Public Health Emergency of International Concern ... as of February 1st, 2020, Chinese health officials have reported approximately 11,953 confirmed cases of infections with 2019-nCoV [COVID-19] in China, with an additional 15,238 suspected cases. China now has more confirmed cases of 2019-nCoV [COVID-19] than it had of severe acute respiratory syndrome (“SARS”) in 2002-2003. As of February 1st, 2020, the virus has killed at least 259 people, all in China.” [3].

As analysed by Zheng, firstly, the realization of their great reliance on Chinese medical supplies among Americans causes the decoupling of the two biggest economies, including the trade war, the raising of tariff, and economic sanctions; secondly, in coping with the virus, the sharp comparison between the efficiency of the Chinese system and the ineffectiveness of the America’s intensifies contradictions of the two different ideologies; thirdly, as America is losing its global leading position, China is considered a huge threat to their global status [8].

Facing the severe international circumstances, the deteriorated relations with the US in particular, both China and Iran are in special need of staunch allies to protect their interests in world affairs. As America is giving a blow to the two countries, China and Iran are much likely to tightened up.

2.2. Bilateral Cooperation of China and Iran Against the COVID-19

Iran announced its first domestic confirmed case on February 19th, and the pandemic soon spread in the country [9]. Given to Iran’s large population, inefficient current medical care, and a battered economy, the country was presumed to suffer a great deal from the epidemic disease. And by the end of February, the pandemic started to spread in the country.

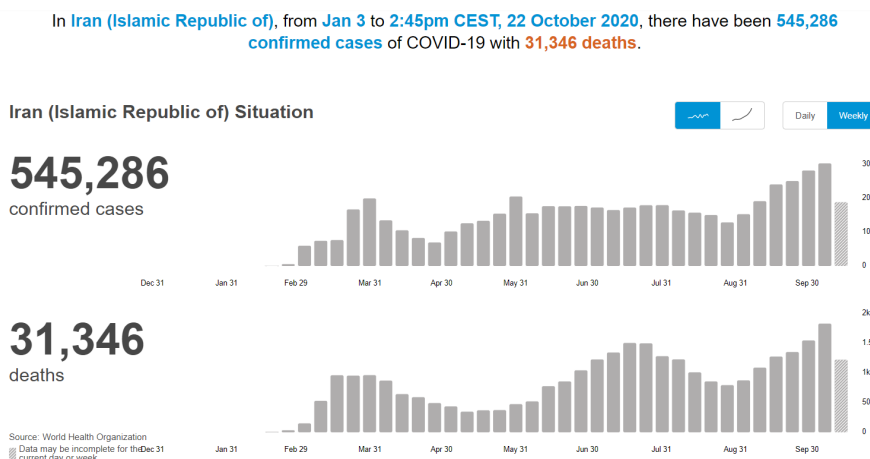


Figure 1: The illustration shows the development of COVID-19 in Iran before 22 October 2020 [10].

Besides, COVID-19 soon landed on and severely infected other countries around the world: “...over the weekend (March 7th and 8th) we crossed 100,000 reported cases of COVID-19 in 100 countries,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [11]; by March 24th, there were over 60 countries had imposed a curfew, placed a lockdown, or declared a state of emergency, and the cumulative numbers of cases were brought to 20,000, 50,000, 70,000 in France, America, and Italy respectively [12]. In a sense, Iran then lost most expected international assistances, as the major countries were busy with their own affairs.

It is particularly noteworthy that the unilateral American bans make the pandemic in Iran to an even worse degree, as “any banking transaction requires permission from the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which blocks foreign firms from engaging in transactions and trade with countries on the US’s sanctions list,” said Hassan Qashqavi [13]. In other words, the US sanctions have caused strong hinderances to Iran in purchasing medicine, masks, medical equipment apparatus, and etc.

China, on the other hand, comparatively recovered from the epidemic, and was willing and capable to help Iran batten down the virus.

Thereupon, on February 28th, Iran received the delivery of the first part of medical assistance provided by Chinese government and the Red Cross Society of China; in the early hours of the morning of February 29th, China sent a group of five medical specialists to Iran who carried some

other medical supplies, exchanged experience with Iranian medical care personnel, and promoted scientific cooperation countering the pandemic between the two countries [14]; on March 2nd, Iran announced to translate Chinese schemes for diagnosis and treatment into Persian [15].

When the COVID-19 is prevalent in Iran, instead of standing by and looking on with folded arms, China took its responsibility as a major country and came to aids to the best of its ability. China's timely assistance which has demonstrated China's senses of responsibility and deep sincerity must contribute to the fundamental of more cooperation and a closer friendship with Iran in the future.

2.3. The Common Interests in Bilateral Trades between China and Iran

Both domestic and international issues put a severe strain to Iran's economy, and has then resulted in many low-income families and high social unemployment rate. Once the low-income groups cannot make a living by the money they earn, the sentiment of anti-government can be stimulated and widely spread through the nation. By the end of 2017, a national wide march broke out, protesting against the government and the state of economy: high unemployment rate of over 13%, high inflation rate of the second half year of over 13% [16].

Since the fight against COVID-19, Iran's economy has been harshly struck to a graver degree. On March 12th, Iran approached the International Monetary Fund for an emergency loan of 5,000,000,000 dollars, which was the first loan Iran applied from IMF and manifested that its capital was exhausted. Besides, according to the World Bank, Iran's gross domestic product growth rate is predicted to be 0%, 1% and 1%, in 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively [17]. The severer economic condition is very much likely to cause an intense anti-government sentiment. Hence, Iran has a hunger for a rapid economic recovery to avoid violent protest marches and social unrests. Except resuming manufactures and tourism which are still under the threats of the pandemic and take much more time and capital to recover, the foreign trade with China provides the most efficient way to its rapid and timely economic growth.

According to the World Bank, the total volume of merchandise trade China imported from Iran surpassed 2 trillion dollars in both 2018 and 2019 [18]. For its industrial manufacture, China has large demands for crude oil, ores and elementary plastic materials; and these primary products require a little process which can be provided by current industries in Iran. In other words, the bilateral trade and economic cooperation is a win-win prospect which meets both countries interests.

Meanwhile, in comparison to the prevalence of COVID-19 and the economic recession in a global range, China has come out of the shadows of the pandemic and resumed its production from March, and correspondingly raised its demands of oil and other raw materials. In this sense, China has become the biggest potential importer of Iran in the following months. This section must be in one column.

3. Challenges

3.1. Uncertainties of Iran Domestic Situation

Three Iranian factors contribute to the uncertainties in the promotion of China-Iran relation: Iranians' preference to cooperation with the West, the complex attitude to the West, and the 2020 general election.

Iranians prefer Western products rather than Chinese ones. The high-ends and high-tech Chinese products has not entered Iran's marketplace; instead, those light industrial manufactures involving little technology are usually seen in the country. This is a main reason why Iranians lose confidence in Chinese manufactures. Besides, lacking of latest knowledge of the development and technology of China, the bias remains in the construction of infrastructures and other cooperation. On the other hand, Western products are preferred. In the perception of common people, the manufacture of the

West stands for high-tech and good quality. When some Western countries return to the Iranian market, Chinese businesses are to face great pressure of competition.

Besides, Iranian people have a complicated attitude towards the West, which might be a challenge to the cooperation with China. On one hand, decades of sanctions imposed to Iran has caused great loss in its economy and development, and, meanwhile, the Western supports to other Middle-East countries such as Sunni Saudi Arabia as well as their partiality to Israel in particular has resulted in a profound grievance among Iranians as a consequence. On the other hand, as mentioned in the Chapter “The Common Interests in Bilateral Trades of China and Iran”, the gloomy economy has generated discontent among Iranian people to their government; thus, they admire and look up to the Western world where they believe are well-off and provide satisfying texture of life.

Thirdly, Iran is having its General Election. The Iranian history of past four decades unveils that it is the period of adjustment to internal affairs and international relations that after the election of a new resident ; therefore, in the following a few months, the uncertainty of political attitudes of Iranian coming government contributes to an impediment of the making of Chinese diplomatic policies to Iran [19].

Besides, as one of the most essential and pressing affairs of the next government is to ease the sanctions unilaterally imposed by the US, Iran is in demands of supports from the West to counter the pressure. Even though the Trump government declared a “rapid resumption of sanctions to Iran”, the international opinions challenge the justice and authority of American sanctions since it has already withdrawn the Iranian Nuclear Agreement, and “the Security Council announced on 14 August its failure to adopt a draft resolution aimed at extending arms-related restrictions on Iran, set to expire in October under resolution 2231 (2015).” To expand its advantages and win European supporters who are still wavering and indecisive, the new Iranian government may take a pro-Western position on international issues and devote more resource and attention on cooperation and interactions with the West rather than China, when China may lose some opportunities in the competition with these countries.

3.2. The Threat of the Secondary Outbreak of COVID-19

By 13 December, there have been 15,648,098 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 293,129 deaths in the US [20]. The Europe is also suffering from a second spike. According to the WHO coronavirus dashboard, France newly reported 39,807 confirmed cases on 5 November, which approached to 40 thousand, Italy over 30 thousand, and the UK, Spain as well as Poland over 20 thousand respectively [21].

Iran is not a neighbour of China, in which circumstance, the trade between the two countries relies on routes going through other countries. Hence, countries on the trading routes can shut down the main transportation and refuse the trains and ships from coming in in order to prevent the spread of the virus. That is to say, lacking of means of conveyance, the trade of materials and merchandise are forced to a halt.

Moreover, China and Iran may also have a second stripe.

In the recent months, provinces such as Xinjiang, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia, Sichuan and Shandong in China has been reporting newly confirmed cases. Zhang Wenhong, Director of Infectious Disease in affiliated hospital with Fudan University, presumed on September 20th that it is certain to have a second outbreak this winter [22]. Moreover, as a number of the infected show no symptoms, the infectivity of the virus is presumed to have increased. On October 8th, Sichuan province is announced to enter a state of war against COVID-19 [23].

While the epidemic is approaching the nation once again, the production and supply of vaccines is assumed to fail to meet the demands if the pandemic prevails China again, especially when parts

of factories are shut down and manufactures are called off because of quarantines. In conclusion, the expected vaccines offer a little help in the fight against the virus.

Meanwhile, since the end of August, the outbreak in Iran has been escalating again, with the figures of both confirmed cases and deaths rising rapidly. Therefore, if either China or Iran failed to prevent COVID-19 from spreading again, the economic cooperation and interaction should have suspended as the virus would take up all energy.

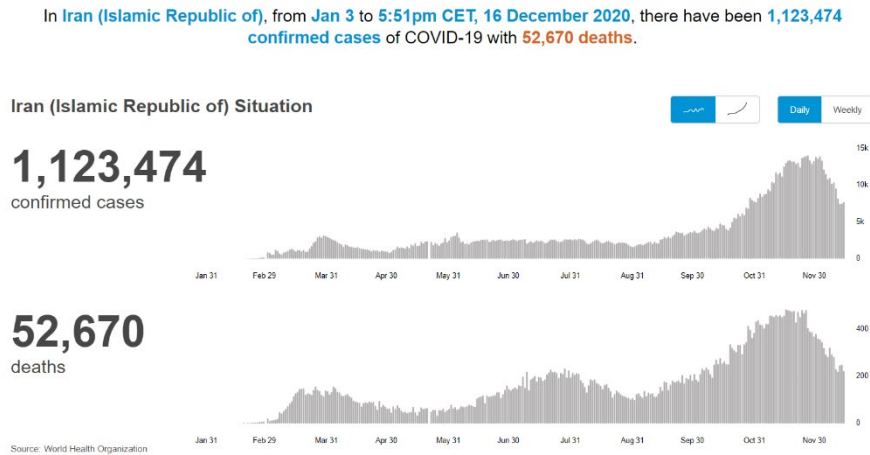


Figure 2: The illustration shows the development of COVID-19 in Iran before 16 December 2020 [24].

3.3. The Obstructions from the other Gulf States, Israel and the US

After the Cold War, China has participated in the governance of the Middle-East area, settling on wars and conflicts in a positive way, deepening energy and strategic cooperation. The proposal of the One Belt One Road which has received much attention and positive support in the area brings China more opportunities for comprehensive interactions. Israel joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015 and started negotiations on the China-Israel Free Trade Zone in 2016. In 2017, China is its largest Asian trading partner and the second largest trading partner in the world [25]. Benefiting all the countries, the friendly relationships between China and the Mideast are expected to deepen in the future.

However, Iran has contradictions and conflicts with these countries. The country struggles with Turkey for their own regional power and influence, takes an “all-out confrontational” stand against Israel, holds a long history of religious conflicts and territorial disputes with the Arab world [26]. Hence, the different attitudes towards the region constitutes an emotional hinderance in the construction of China-Iran relation.

Another possible impediment of China-Iran relation is the United States. The result of President election was acknowledged, and Biden’s win is generally regarded as the US’s shifting to its traditional policies. As predicted by Song, “the Biden administration represents the return of the traditional US ... maintenance of US global reputation and respect for the international system ...” [27]. So is its policy to Iran. The US probably will return to the JCPOA, and as shown in the report, “Biden even publicly stated that he still holds previous perspectives on the Iran nuclear deal - and if Tehran returns to ‘strict compliance with the nuclear deal,’ Washington will re-join the plan.” [28].

There is also possibility that the Biden government eases the tension with Iran in order to slow down the development of China-Iran relation and to prevent China from getting involved in more Middle East affairs. From the perspective of the Washington, a decreased tension can serve as another way to curb the rise of China and avoid a further involvement of China in the Middle East affairs.

4. Conclusions

Three opportunities are discussed in the essay. Firstly, the deteriorating Sino-US and Iran -US relations are one of the most vital international backgrounds where China-Iran relations are embracing opportunities for improvements. Secondly, the cooperation of the two countries in the combat against COVID-19 contributes to the fundament of more interactions in the future. Thirdly, the economic interests are of strong consistency, as Iran has a huger for exporting the oil while China importing.

Challenges are also taken into consideration. Firstly, Iranian domestic situation offers some reasons to be less optimistic, as Chinese businesses entering Iran market face the threat from Iranians' more or less biased knowledge of China and the attitude of the next Iranian government is still misty. Besides, the economic trade is also challenged by the secondary outbreak when transportations might be cut down and the economy of both countries might be battered again by another prevalence. Moreover, apart from China and Iran themselves, external factors bring obstructions as well. China's relationships with other Gulf countries may cause discontent from Iran. The Washington may decrease the tension with Iran in order to prevent China from getting closer with Iran.

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