

China's Ideological Influence and Trade Relations with Iran, 1960-1990

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Since the establishment of a socialist order in China in 1949, the Chinese leadership has defined the country's domestic and foreign policy: building socialism at home, aiding and abetting revolutionary movements in the international arena, and maintaining ties with the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc. Sino-Soviet relations were close until 1953 when relations deteriorated after the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. China condemned his successor Nikita Khrushchev as a revisionist and renegade of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism. In order to expand its influence China declared its solidarity with antiimperialist and revolutionary movements and began to cultivate good relations with the developing countries. The focus of this article is to examine China's patterns of interaction with Iran during the last decade of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule, her ideological influence on Iranian Maoist organizations, and her trade relations with Iran after the downfall of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic state headed by Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini in February 1979.

Historical Background

China's alliance with the Soviet Union and its bloc and her ideological and political support for the anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements throughout the world caused the United States to withhold formal recognition and postpone the establishment of diplomatic ties with China. The Shah of Iran also regarded the Sino-Soviet alliance as perilous to Iran's security and national interests and also withheld formal recognition of China. When the Shah was ousted and a nationalist government was formed under the leadership of Mohammad Mossadeq in 1951, China welcomed the new development in Iran and Mossadeq's policy of nationalizing British oil companies. Although Mossadeq was a mascot of the bourgeoisie, China was dismayed when the monarchists, backed by the

United States, toppled his government in August 1953 and brought back the Shah to Iran. China characterized the downfall of Mossadeq and the return of the Shah as follows.

"[The United States] have penetrated into Iran on a large scale in the political, military, and economic fields, thus reducing the country to a virtual United States colony."¹

The Sino-Soviet rift in the late 1950s created divisions within the international communist movement. Pro-Beijing intelligentsia in Iran began to reflect the Chinese brand of socialism and propagated the politics of armed insurrection as the only means of toppling the Shah and his regime. Although China did not provide financial aid to the Iranian Maoists in their struggle for a socialist system, it supported them on ideological and political grounds. China was critical of U.S.-Iran relations, and accused the Shah's regime of suppressing Iranian workers, peasants, and revolutionary movements. The Shah's regime was portrayed as an instrument of U.S. imperialism in the region. According to the Chinese leadership

"[The Iranian regime] is using every means – threats, intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and death sentences – to suppress the workers, peasants, and revolutionary intellectuals, and thus bans all organizations ... The regime in Iran is one which is meekly subservient to the U.S. imperialists even though it talks about reforms and the preservation of national independence ... We support the revolutionary struggle of the Iranian people against colonialism and are convinced that with the precious experience accumulated in the long years of their fight against imperialism and the reactionaries at home, the toiling people of Iran, who are subjected to colonial domination, will certainly destroy in good speed the reactionary regime and win victory in their struggle."²

China regarded increased Soviet influence in Afghanistan, India, Mongolia and other East Asian countries as a threat to her security. To counter the Soviet threat China began to normalize and strengthen her relations with the developing countries. Because of her strategic interests in the Middle East, an anti-Soviet stand formed the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy toward Iran until the demise of the Soviet Union. This policy relegated to the background all revolutionary aims of Chinese foreign policy toward

1 Survey of China Mainland Press, No. 2501, 16 May 1961. Cited in Rosemary Foot, "China's Relationship with Iran." *Contemporary Review* 226: 1309 (February, 1975): 100-104.

2 "Resolution on Iran." *Peking Review* 9: 29 (15 July 1966): 43-44.

Iran. In early 1965 China and Iran began a series of informal negotiations concerning resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Iran's decision to recognize China and establish diplomatic relations was prompted primarily by the power vacuum created by British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in 1971 and increased Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean, as well as its frequent incursions in the Persian Gulf and the Iraqi port of Um Qasr. As a first step in this direction Iran supported China's admission to the United Nations, justifying its position as follows:

"China is a colossal nation with a population exceeding 700 million people. If the world is striving for such goals as general disarmament and control of atomic weapons, how is it possible to achieve these ideals without China's compliance with the sanctioned rules and laws. Unless the world can be confident of China's willingness to cooperate, universal disarmament will never be realized nor will the world ever be prepared to give up atomic weapons. For this reason and in view of the fact that China is established on the mainland, we believe that China should be admitted to the United Nations, although we have no relations with that country."³

Sino-Iran relations gradually improved to the extent that on 13 April 1971 the Shah sent his sister, Ashraf, to Beijing to discuss issues concerning diplomatic relations between the two countries. Chinese Premier Chou En-lai welcomed the Shah's envoy and expressed his country's desire for establishing friendly relations with Iran. China, which had formerly referred to the Shah, who was engaged in suppressing the national liberation struggles at home and in the region, as a surrogate of "U.S. imperialism", now praised him for waging a "just struggle" in defense of the rights of the people of Iran. During a speech Premier Chou En-lai stated:

"Since World War II there have been fewer contacts between our two countries as a result of the imperialist obstruction and sabotage. However, the Chinese people have always followed with interest and attention the Iranian people's efforts in their struggle against foreign aggression and for national construction. In order to safeguard state sovereignty and protect their national resources, Iran together with other members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, have recently waged effective struggle against the Western imperialist oil monopoly consortiums and have won victory. We express support to

3 Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Iran's Foreign Policy: A Compendium of the Writings and Statements of His Imperial Majesty Shahanshah Aryamehr* (Tehran: n.d.), pp. 133-34.

your just struggle ... We hope your visit will contribute to ... the gradual development of friendly relations between our two countries."⁴

Shortly after Ashraf's visit to Beijing the Shah's other sister, Fatimeh, went to China on 30 April 1971. Although the two visits laid the foundation for resumption of diplomatic ties between the two countries, the Shah was waiting for a signal from the United States, which came shortly after President Richard Nixon's celebrated visit to Beijing on 15 July 1971. On 17 August 1971 Iran and China announced the establishment of diplomatic relations. Iran appointed its ambassador to Beijing on 12 March 1972 and China sent its ambassador to Tehran on 4 April 1972. The Sino-Iranian relationship was further strengthened by a visit of Chinese Premier Chou En-lai and Foreign Minister Chi Peng-fei to Tehran in June 1973. The establishment of diplomatic ties also led to expansion of trade between the two countries. China's imports from Iran included chemical fertilizers, agricultural equipment, minibuses, trucks, motor scooters, refrigerators, television sets, sodium carbonate, sulphur, detergents and aluminium ingots. Exports included paints, stationary, sportswear, antimony, foodstuffs, assorted tin, iron, steel products, tea and fabrics.⁵ Table 1 shows the value of Sino-Iranian trade in 1969-75.

Table 1: Value of China's non-oil trade with Iran (in 1000 rials)
\$U.S. = 70.35 rials

Year	Exports	Imports
1969-70	125,343	40,334
1970-71	137,311	323,664
1971-72	344,487	434,809
1972-73	1,280,156	2,369,421
1973-74	1,688,359	519,569
1974-75	1,788,603	176,797

Source: Middle East Economic Digest (MEED), 15 November 1974, pp. 1395-96; 25 April 1975, pp. 27-28.

4 Peking Review 14: 17 (23 April 1971), p. 3.

5 Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Iran's Foreign Policy 1941-1973: A Study of Foreign Policy in Modernizing Nations* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 432; A.H.H. Abidi, *op. cit.* pp. 242-43.

China's imports from Iran also included oil. Between 1960-66 China imported 1,393,000 tons of crude oil (199,000 tons per annum).⁶ She resumed the purchase of crude oil from Iran in 1974 and imported approximately 200,000 tons in 1976 and 300,000 tons in 1977.⁷ China also took keen interest in modernizing Iran's silk and textile industries. In 1974 she sent two silk textile technicians to Iran to train 20 Iranian workers in the sericulture industry in the Ramiyan region. Although the Iranian government restricted the movement of the Chinese experts among the local population fearing, that they might propagate revolutionary ideology among Iranian farmers and peasants, the Chinese leadership was pleased to be able to register their presence among the Iranian peasants and laboring classes. To further expand its influence in Iran, China began cultural and educational exchange programs. In February 1976 China provided scholarships to four Iranian students to study in Beijing and resumed air communications between Tehran and Beijing. The Chinese leadership characterized the latest development in Sino-Iran relations as follows:

"This aerial bridge ... has directly linked the four countries and created still more favorable conditions for the further development of mutual contacts among the peoples of various countries; the promotion of economic and cultural exchanges and the consolidation and strengthening of friendly relations ... We are deeply convinced that though this air bridge of friendship, the four countries' people and the people of various Third World countries will be united more closely in their common struggle."⁸

China's Influence on Iran's Politics

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries, China supported Iran's policy in the Persian Gulf, South Asia and the Indian Ocean, particularly her policy of mediation between India and Pakistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and her efforts to reduce Soviet influence in the region. China endorsed the Shah's policy of a "united struggle against big power hegemonism and its defense capability."⁹ The Shah

6 Wolfgang Bartke, *Oil in the People's Republic of China: Industry Structure, Production, Exports* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), p. 44.

7 A.H.H. Abidi, *China, Iran and the Persian Gulf* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1982), p. 262.

8 *People's Daily* 27 November 1974.

9 See Foreign Broadcast Information Service – FBIS/China August-September issues, 1976.

considered that good relations with Beijing would emasculate his internal opponents, the pro-Soviet Tudeh party, and would serve to broaden his social base of support among pro-Chinese social forces both at home and abroad. The Tudeh Party, founded by Taqi Arani on 2 October 1941, did not advocate revolutionary armed struggle but rather an evolutionary transition to socialism. Because of its passivity the Party foundered in 1965 when two members of its central committee, Ahmad Qasimi and Ghulam Hussein Ferotan and an alternate member of the central committee, Abbas Shaghyee, renounced the Tudeh Party as too quiescent and unable to lead the revolutionary armed struggle in the country. They supported China's ideology of peoples revolution and formed the Revolutionary Tudeh Party (RTP) with the publication of Tufan (Storm).¹⁰ Contrary to the Shah's wishes to win support of the Maoists by strengthening Iran's relations with China, the Maoists advocated the overthrow of his regime.

The newly founded Maoist organization, RTP split in 1967 and another faction, Sazman-e-Enqilab-e-Hizbi Tudeh dar Kharij (Revolutionary Organization of the Tudeh Party Abroad) was founded. The former postulated that revolution would start in the largest conurbations and then spread to the countryside and labelled the notion of starting revolution in the countryside as an aberration characteristic of Castroite deviationism.¹¹ The latter adhered to Mao's theory of revolution based on encircling the cities via villages.¹² In order to gain experience a number of Maoists went to China and engaged in political activities there.¹³ The Maoists concentrated their work among workers and trade unions and advocated armed struggle against the Shah's regime. Although they were fighting for a socialist cause in Iran, their patrons in Beijing continued to maintain and nurture solidarity with the Shah who was brutally suppressing and executing revolutionaries attempting to organize and propagate the very ideology on which the Chinese state was founded. Table 2 shows Maoist organizations active in Iran in the mid 1970s.

10 Tulsiram, *The History of Communist Movement in Iran* (Bhopal, India: Grafix Publishing House, 1981), pp. 144-45.

11 "The Revisionists and the Revolutionary Organizations." Tufan No. 40, December 1970, pp. 3-4; Tufan - Marxist Leninist Organization. *Namuna-e-Manfi* [Negative Symbiosis] (n.p. 1970), pp. 1-78.

12 Tufan - Revolutionary Organization, *Mosavibat-e-Dovomin Kanfarans* [Regulation for the Second Conference] (n.p. 1965), pp. 1-15.

13 A.H.H. Abidi. op. cit. 52.

Table 2: Maoist Organizations in Iran

Organization	Orientation	Formation/Duration
Paykar	Maoist	1974-1983
Kumalah	Maoist	1978
Ranjbaran	Maoist	1979-1985
Ettehad-i Mobarezan	Maoist	1979-1981
Union of Iranian Communists	Maoist	1975-1981
Tufan	Maoist	1974-

Source: Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Left and Political Islam in Iran: A Retrospect and Prospects." *Radical History Review* 51 (Fall 1991), p. 35.

China's ideological differences with Albania and its rapprochement with the United States in the early 1970s had an impact on the Maoist movement in Iran. The Iranian Maoists split due to ideological and political differences over the course of revolution in Iran and changes in China's politics. New and small organizations effloresced, denouncing China's support for the Shah and its rapprochement with the West. The inchoate organizations, Paykar and Tufan declared their solidarity with Enver Hoxha, head of the Party of Labour of Albania. Ranjbaran, Kumalah and the Union of Iranian Communists known as Sarbedaran (heads on gallows) supported Chairman Mao Tse-tung, despite their own differences over the question of strategy and tactics of revolution in Iran. The latter was a signatory to the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement founded in the early 1980s.¹⁴

After the death of Chairman Mao Tse-tung on 8 September 1976 Sino-Iranian relations continued as before. Mao's successor Hua Kuo-feng reiterated China's support for the Shah's domestic and foreign policy orientation, his defense build-up, and forward policy in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Sino-Iran relations were further consolidated after the establishment of a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan on 27 April 1978. The Kabul regime's political rhetoric concerning the rights of self-determination

14 A discussion concerning the Union of Iranian Communists (Sarbedaran) and their battle with the Islamic regime is found in Sepehr Zabih, *The Left in Contemporary Iran: Ideology, Organization and the Soviet Connection* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 158-189; Declaration of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, (n.p.) March 1984.

of the Pushtun and Baluch peoples (Baluchis were divided between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) posed a threat to peace and stability in the region and compelled the Shah to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan by expanding Iran's relations with China. Chairman Hua Kuo-feng was the last Chinese leader who visited Iran on 29 August 1978. He met the Shah and discussed issues of mutual interest with him and declared China's position in aiding and abetting the anti-Soviet resistance movement in Afghanistan.¹⁵ China supported the Shah against his internal opponents. During the anti-Shah demonstration on 8 September 1978, which eventually drove the Shah into exile in January 1979, China condemned the demonstrators and accused them of being financed and organized from abroad.¹⁶

China and Iran during Khomeini's Era

After the establishment of an Islamic regime in Iran in February 1979, China recognized the Islamic state. However, Sino-Iran relations lacked fervor because clerics blamed China's support of the Shah's continuing bloodshed during his crackdown on the people's movement. China maintained a low profile when students loyal to Khomeini seized the U.S. Embassy and held hostage its diplomats. The U.S. effort to rescue the hostages led to a break in U.S.-Iran relations. China accused the Soviet Union of having a hand in the crisis and maintained a balanced position as regards U.S.-Iran relations.

"We are concerned about the recent events involving Iran and the United States. We always held that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of other countries and that internal affairs of each country should be managed by its own people. But, we also always hold that the principles guiding international relations and accepted diplomatic immunities should be universally respected. We hope that a reasonable solution can be found at an early date through peaceful consultation in accordance with the principles of International Law and diplomatic practice."¹⁷

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- 15 For details of China's policy in Afghanistan see Hafizullah Emadi, "China's Politics and Developments in Afghanistan." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 28: 1-2 (January-June, 1993).
- 16 *Afrique-Asie*, No. 170, 18 September 1978.
- 17 Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), London, The Far East/6282/A 4/4, 27 November 1979.

Iran remained hostile toward the United States and its ally, Israel, and used anti-imperialist and anti-zionist rhetoric to garner support of the Islamic forces within and outside the country. They did not want to break ties with the United States but wanted to establish new arrangements which would be more favorable for the ruling bourgeoisie in Iran. Iran's newly formulated shibboleth "Neither West nor East" limited China's interaction with Iran. The radical Left was divided in its stand toward the Islamic regime. The Union of Iranian Communists (Sarbedaran) initially supported the regime at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war and called upon people and progressive organizations and groups to unite and defend the revolution and the motherland and declared its readiness to participate in the war against the Baathist regime.¹⁸ The organization withdrew its support when the Islamic regime began suppressing the revolutionary forces. It launched a guerilla war against the regime in January 1982, captured the Caspian city of Amol and administered the city until the government forces liberated it.

The organization suffered enormous casualties and lost most of its core cadres. Other Maoist organizations were also disenchanted by the regime's policies concerning the future direction of developments in Iran and engaged in internecine battle against the regime in Kurdistan in August 1979 and Turkaman Sahra in January 1980. Kak Foad Soltani, head of the radical Kurdish organization, Kumalah (the Organization of the Toilers of Kurdistan), led the Kurdish armed struggle in Sanandaj and Mervin. When government forces raided Kurdish villages it was estimated that 27,000 Kurds, of whom 2,500 were Kurdish resistance fighters lost their lives. Soltani and many of his fellow fighters were killed during the battle.¹⁹ Post-Mao China neither expressed any support for the Maoists and other progressive forces in Iran nor did it condemn Iran for executing the regime's opponents.

In contrast to the Maoists a significant number of the Iranian Left participated in the 1979 election for seats in Iran's Assembly of Experts and Parliament. Massoud Rajavi, head of the Mujahidin-e-Khalq (People's Holy Warriors) declared his candidacy for the post of presidency. His nomination was rejected by the Supreme Council of religious establishment on the grounds that his philosophy of Islamic eclecticism was in sharp contradiction with Islamic teachings. After a fierce battle with the Islamic regime which cost the lives of approximately one hundred top cadres of his organization, Rajavi fled to France. Leading members of the

18 The Union of Iranian Communists, *Iran: Flames of Revolution*, No. 2, May 1981, p. 25.

19 For more details see Hafizullah Emadi "Conflicts in the Middle East: The Kurdish National Question." *Contemporary Review* 261: 1519 (August 1992): 62-71.

pro-Soviet Tudeh Party contested for seats in the parliamentary elections. Ehsan Tabari obtained 47,225 votes; N. Kianouri, 32,627; M. Amouyee, 25,792 and M. Farmanfaryian 25,435 votes. Representatives of the Fidayee organization, R. Danishgari (115,334), M. Madani (100,894), and H. Raisi (90,641) obtained the highest number of votes cast during the elections followed by the representative of Paykar organization, M. Aladpoosh, who obtained 49,979 votes.²⁰ Leftists who fought against the Islamic state suffered heavy losses. Table 3 shows the number of radical intellectuals who had been executed by the Islamic regime.

Table 3: Number of Maoists and former Maoists killed by the Iranian Regime

Organization	No. Male	No. Female	Total
Paykar	164	27	191
Kumalah	142	7	149
Ranjbaran	22	1	23
Ettehadi	1	2	3
Mobarezan			
Union of Iranian Communists	58	3	61
Tufan	18	1	19

Source: Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Left and Political Islam in Iran: A Retrospect and Prospects." *Radical History Review* 51 (Fall 1991), p.37.

China maintained a neutral stand vis-a-vis the Iran-Iraq war and refrained from making any value judgments on the claims and counterclaims of the contending parties, although it urged them to resolve their disputes through negotiations. According to Beijing

... "It is only natural for some problems and disputes left over by history to have existed between Iraq and Iran. Other Third World countries have similar problems. As Third World countries and Islamic states, if Iraq and Iran could set their general interests above anything else, re-

20 Ali Mirsepassi-Ashtiani and Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Left and Political Islam in Iran." *Radical History Review* 51 (Fall, 1991), p. 36.

spect each other and turn hostility into friendship, any problems, no matter how complicated they are, can be solved."²¹

China accused the Soviet Union of escalating tensions between Iran and Iraq in order to advance its own objectives. Sino-Iran relations remained at a diplomatic level until the moderate wing of the clerics succeeded in consolidating their base of power by 1985. Subsequently they began to expand Iran's relations with China and North Korea. In July 1985 the Speaker of the House of Parliament, Hashemi Rafsanjani, visited Beijing and discussed the prospect for increased Sino-Iranian trade. The Iraq-Iran war compelled Iran to turn to China so that it could obtain military equipment that it had difficulty in purchasing from the West and the Soviet Union. Although China provided Iran with military equipment it desperately needed to fight the war with Iraq, China sold military equipment to Iraq as well.

In 1986 China and North Korea supplied approximately 70% of all Iranian military equipment. By October 1987 China provided Iran with artillery, shells, mortar rounds, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry and an estimated one hundred C-801 antiship missiles. China also sent technicians to train Iranian personnel in operating and maintaining the high-tech weaponry.²² Available data indicates that China exported \$600 million worth of arms and ammunition to Iran in 1986 and \$1 billion in 1987.²³ Sino-Iran relations were further enhanced by a visit of China's deputy foreign minister to Iran in August 1988 and Iran's President Hujat al-Islam Ali Khamenei's visit to Beijing in May 1989.²⁴ Table 4 shows China's trade with Iran in 1978-1987.

Table 4: Sino-Iranian Trade, 1978-87 (in \$million)

	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87
China's Imports	49	29	53	2	81	25	14	7	5	4
China's Exports	72	40	133	179	45	294	170	92	55	104

Source: Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World- Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 195

21 Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), *The Far East*, 6533/A 4/1, 26 September 1980.

22 R.K. Ramazani, "Iran's Resistance to the U.S. Intervention in the Persian Gulf." In Nikki R. Keddi and Mark J. Gosiorowski (eds.), *Neither East nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union and the United States* (New York: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 44-45.

23 *Middle East Economic Digest (MEED)* 22 August 1987, vol. 31, no. 34, p. 11.

24 *FBIS/NES* 9 May 1989, p. 521.

Conclusion

During the early period of Mao's leadership China's Middle East policy was based on lending ideological support to revolutionary anti-systemic and Marxist-Leninist organizations. When Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1950s China accused the Soviet Union of revisionism and social imperialism and began to project itself as a true friend and ally of the oppressed peoples and nations. China lacked the military capacity to assert its influence in the Middle East but its barrage of political and ideological rhetoric nonetheless had a strong impact on the politics of the region. China supported peoples' uprisings against the two superpowers and declared its solidarity with the revolutionary and nationalist movements in the region.

China's rapprochement with the United States in the early 1970s contributed to improvements in its relations with Iran but eroded its base of support among people involved in revolutionary movements. The Chinese leadership postulated that the Soviet Union was a major imperialist power and posed a dangerous threat to stability in the Middle East. For this reason China supported the Shah, his regime, and his ambitions to become a regional power. The pursuance of this policy deemphasized Chinese support of revolutionary movements in Iran. After the establishment of an Islamic order in Iran in February 1979, Sino-Iranian relations suffered a setback. Their relations began to improve by the mid-1980s when the moderate wing of the clerics had consolidated their position in the state apparatus. U.S. and Soviet support for Iraq was a major reason why the Iranian leadership felt compelled to strengthen its relations with China in order to obtain Chinese weaponry to continue the war with Iraq. The prevailing anti-U.S. sentiment, lack of visible U.S. influence in Iran and Iraq, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a superpower provided China with an opportunity to be a major player in the politics of the region. De-Maoization and capitalist-oriented policies in the post-Mao period made China a talismanic business partner in the eyes of liberals, conservatives and radical Islamic regimes in the region.