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NEW GREAT GAME REVISITED, Part 2

Iran, China and the New Silk Road

By Pepe Escobar

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HONG KONG - Does it make sense to talk about a Beijing-[Tehran](#) axis? Apparently no, when one learns that Iran's application to become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was flatly denied at the 2008 summit in Tajikistan.

Apparently yes, when one sees how the military dictatorship of the mullahtariat in Tehran and the collective leadership in Beijing have dealt with their recent turmoil - the "green revolution" in Tehran and the Uighur riots in Urumqi - reawakening in the West the ghostly mythology of "Asian despotism".

The Iran-China relationship is like a game of Chinese boxes. Amid the turbulence, glorious or terrifying, of their equally millenarian histories, when one sees an Islamic Republic that now reveals itself as a militarized theocracy and a Popular Republic that is in fact a capitalist oligarchy, things are not what they seem to be.

No matter what recently happened in Iran, consolidating the power the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad-IRGC axis, the relationship will continue to develop within the framework of a clash between US hyperpower - declining as it may be - and the aspiring Chinese big power, allied with the re-emergent Russian big power.

On the road

Iran and China are all about the New [Silk Road](#) - or routes - in Eurasia. Both are among the most venerable and ancient of (on the road) partners. The first encounter between the Parthian empire and the Han dynasty was in 140 BC, when Zhang Qian was sent to Bactria (in today's

Afghanistan) to strike deals with nomad populations. This eventually led to Chinese expansion in Central Asia and interchange with [India](#).

Trading exploded via the fabled Silk Road - silk, porcelain, horses, amber, ivory, incense. As a serial [traveler](#) across the Silk Road over the years, I ended up learning on the spot how the Persians controlled the Silk Road by mastering the art of making oases, thus becoming in the process the middlemen between China, India and the West.

Parallel to the land route there was also a naval route - from the Persian Gulf to Canton (today's [Guangzhou](#)). And there was of course a religious route - with Persians translating Buddhist texts and with Persian villages in the desert serving as springboards to Chinese pilgrims visiting India. Zoroastrianism - the official religion of the Sassanid empire - was imported to China by Persians at the end of the 6th century, and Manichaeism during the 7th. Diplomacy followed: the son of the last Sassanid emperor - fleeing the Arabs in 670 AD - found refuge in the Tang court. During the Mongol period, Islam spread into China.

Iran has never been colonized. But it was a privileged theater of the original Great Game between the British Empire and Russia in the 19th century and then during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union in the 20th. The Islamic Revolution may at first imply Khomeini's official policy of "neither East nor West". In fact, Iran dreams of bridging both.

That brings us to Iran's key, inescapable geopolitical role at the epicenter of Eurasia. The New Silk Road translates into an energy corridor - the Asian Energy Security Grid - in which the Caspian Sea is an essential node, linked to the Persian Gulf, from where oil is to be transported to Asia. And as far as gas is concerned, the name of the game is Pipelineistan - as in the recently agreed Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline and the interconnection between Iran and Turkmenistan, whose end result is a direct link between Iran and China.

Then there's the hyper-ambitious, so-called "North-South corridor" - a projected road and rail link between Europe and India, through Russia, Central Asia, Iran and the Persian Gulf. And the ultimate New Silk Road dream - an actual land route between China and the Persian Gulf via Central Asia (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan).

The width of the circle

As the bastion of Shi'ite faith, encircled by Sunnis, Iran under what is now a de facto theocratic dictatorship still desperately needs to break out from its isolation. Talk about a turbulent environment: Iraq still under US occupation to the west, the ultra-unstable Caucasus in the northwest, fragile Central Asian "stans" in the northeast, basket cases Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east, not to mention the nuclear neighborhood -[Israel](#), Russia, China, Pakistan and India.

Technological advancement for Iran means fully mastering a civilian nuclear program - which contains the added benefit of turning it into a sanctuary via the possibility of building a nuclear device. Officially, Tehran has declared ad infinitum it has no intention of possessing an "un-Islamic" bomb. Beijing understands Tehran's delicate position and supports its right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Beijing would have loved to see Tehran adopt the plan

proposed by Russia, the US, Western Europe and, of course, China. Carefully evaluating its vital energy and national security interests, the last thing Beijing wants is for [Washington](#) to clench its fist again.

What happened to the George W Bush-declared, post-9/11 "global war on terror" (GWOT), now remixed by Obama as "overseas contingency operations" (OCO)? GWOT's key, shadowy aim was for Washington to firmly plant the flag in Central Asia. For those sorry neo-cons, China was the ultimate geopolitical enemy, so nothing was more enticing than to try to sway a batch of Asian countries against China. Easier dreamed of than done.

China's counter-power was to turn the whole game around in Central Asia, with Iran as its key peon. Beijing was quick to grasp that Iran is a matter of national security, in terms of assuring its vast energy needs.

Of course China also needs Russia - for energy and technology. This is arguably more of an alliance of circumstance - for all the ambitious targets embodied by the SCO - than a long-term strategic partnership. Russia, invoking a series of geopolitical reasons, considers its relationship with Iran as exclusive. China says slow down, we're also in the picture. And as Iran remains under pressure at different levels from both the US and Russia, what better "savior" than China?

Enter Pipelineistan. At first sight, Iranian energy and Chinese technology is a match made in heaven. But it's more complicated than that.

Still the victim of US sanctions, Iran has turned to China to modernize itself. Once again, the Bush/Dick Cheney years and the invasion of Iraq sent an unmistakable message to the collective leadership in Beijing. A push to control Iraq oil plus troops in Afghanistan, a stone's throw from the Caspian, added to the Pentagon's self-defined "arc of instability" from the Middle East to Central Asia - this was more than enough to imprint the message: the less dependent China is on US-subjugated Arab Middle East energy, the better.

The Arab Middle East used to account for 50% of China's oil imports. Soon China became the second-largest oil importer from Iran, after Japan. And since fateful 2003, China also has mastered the full cycle of prospection/exploitation/refining - thus Chinese companies are investing heavily in Iran's oil sector, whose refining capacity, for instance, is risible. Without urgent investment, some projections point to Iran possibly cutting off oil exports by 2020. Iran also needs everything else China can provide in areas like transportation systems, telecom, electricity and naval construction.

Iran needs China to develop its gas production in the gigantic north Pars and south Pars fields - which it shares with Qatar - in the Persian Gulf. So no wonder a "stable" Iran had to become a matter of Chinese national security.

Multipolar we go

So why the stalemate at the SCO? As China is always meticulously seeking to improve its global credibility, it had to be considering the pros and cons of admitting Iran, for which the

SCO and its slogan of mutual cooperation for the stability of Central Asia, as well as economic and security benefits, are priceless. The SCO fights against Islamic terrorism and "separatism" in general - but now has also developed as an economic body, with a development fund and a multilateral economic council. The whole idea of it is to curb American influence in Central Asia.

Iran has been an observer since 2005. Next year may be crucial. The race is on to beat the clock, before a desperate Israeli strike, and have Iran accepted by the SCO while negotiating some sort of stability pact with the Barack Obama administration. For all this to happen relatively smoothly, Iran needs China - that is, to sell as much oil and gas as China needs below market prices, while accepting Chinese - and Russian - investment in the exploration and production of Caspian oil.

All this while Iran also courts India. Both Iran and India are focused on Central Asia. In Afghanistan, India is financing the construction of a US\$250 million road between Zaranj, at the Iranian border, and Delaram - which is in the Afghan ring road linking Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif. [New Delhi](#) sees in Iran a very important market. India is actively involved in the construction of a deep water port in Chabahar - that would be a twin for the Gwadar port built in southern Balochistan by China, and would be very helpful to landlocked Afghanistan (freeing it from Pakistani interference).

Iran also needs its doors to the north - the Caucasus and Turkey - to channel its energy production towards Europe. It's an uphill struggle. Iran has to fight fierce regional competition in the Caucasus; the US-Turkey alliance framed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; the perpetual US-Russian Cold War in the region; and last but not least Russia's own energy policy, which simply does not contemplate sharing the European energy market with Iran.

But energy agreements with Turkey are now part of the picture - after the moderate Islamists of the AKP took power in Ankara in 2002. Now it's not that far-fetched to imagine the possibility of Iran in the near future supplying much-needed gas for the ultra-expensive, US-supported Turkey-to-Austria Nabucco pipeline.

But the fact remains that for both Tehran and Beijing, the American thrust in the "arc of instability" from the Middle East to Central Asia is anathema. They're both anti-US hegemony and US unilateralism, Bush/Cheney style. As emerging powers, they're both pro multipolar. And as they're not Western-style liberal democracies, the empathy is even stronger. Few failed to notice the stark similarities in the degree of repression of the "green revolution" in Tehran and the Uighurs in Xinjiang. For China, a strategic alliance with Iran is above all about Pipelineistan, the Asian Energy Security Grid and the New Silk Road. For China, a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear dossier is imperative. This would lead to Iran being fully opened to (eager) European investment. Washington may be reluctant to admit it, but in the New Great Game in Eurasia, the Tehran-Beijing axis spells out the future: multipolarity.