



Don't Count On China To Curb Iran

February 1, 2024 Ilan I. Berman Newsweek

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Terrorism; Warfare; China; Iran; United States

In its increasingly frantic efforts to deter the Houthis, the Yemeni rebels now menacing maritime shipping in the Red Sea, the Biden administration has hit upon a new strategy: begging Beijing for help.

Over the past few weeks, senior White House officials have repeatedly appealed to China's government to intercede with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Houthis' main geopolitical sponsor, to curb the radical militia's disruptive behavior. National security advisor even huddled with China's foreign minister in Thailand this past weekend to press the issue.

The Biden administration's outreach is logical. As National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby has explained, "China has influence over Tehran. ... And they have the ability to have conversations ... that we can't." The administration, Kirby made clear, wants Beijing to use that influence to "help stem the flow of weapons and munitions to the Houthis."

China's ability to shape Iranian behavior is more extensive than most realize. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is now the Islamic Republic's largest trading partner, accounting for some 25 percent of total Iranian trade. It is also Iran's top oil customer, averaging imports of more than a million barrels per day over the past year amid surging Iranian oil output.

Beijing's clout isn't just economic. China's leaders also wield substantial political and strategic influence over Tehran.

Back in 2021, Beijing and Tehran concluded a sprawling \$400 billion, quarter century framework deal. That arrangement, designed to mitigate the adverse effects of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy, gave the PRC first-mover advantage on things like access to Iranian ports, the development of Iran's telecom network, and infrastructure construction and transportation projects in the Islamic Republic. It also laid the groundwork for closer coordination between the militaries of the two countries.

Three years on, the agreement remains mostly notional, in part because the Biden administration's more conciliatory approach to Iran has strengthened its economy considerably. But Beijing's past willingness to serve as a strategic lifeline has bred a reservoir of political goodwill among Iran's ayatollahs, and Iranian officials have persistently tried to get the PRC to deepen its stake in their country further.

?All of which gives Beijing considerable sway over Tehran. The question is whether China's leaders are inclined to use it.

The answer, it seems, is "not really." In a nod to American entreaties, Chinese officials did recently reach out to their Iranian counterparts and urge them to curb Houthi activities. Yet Beijing's pressure has been decidedly superficial. The PRC seems solely interested in safeguarding its own economic interests, and has given no signsthat it's prepared to take any decisive steps to stabilize the broader region.

That belies a sobering reality. Contrary to what the Biden administration might hope, it's not really in Beijing's interest to rein in Tehran or its proxies. To the contrary, the Islamic Republic's increasingly aggressive regional profile is deeply beneficial to the PRC.

For years now, China has worked to convince Middle Eastern states that it can offer a compelling alternative to the established, American-led regional order. It has done so through diplomatic initiatives (like brokering a détente last spring between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran), and via new security concepts, like its much-promoted "new security architecture for the Middle East."

Now, escalating provocations by Iran and its assorted proxies (including, most recently, a drone attack on a U.S. base in Jordan that killed three American soldiers) have helped expose the bankruptcy of the Biden administration's Middle East policy and the current flimsiness of U.S. deterrence. They have also helped highlight China's growing attractiveness as a potential substitute. All of which naturally rebounds to Beijing's geopolitical benefit.

Perhaps the White House understands all this, and is simply reaching out to China as a matter of protocol. Or maybe Team Biden truly believes the PRC can be incentivized to play a more constructive role in the region in spite of its "managed competition" with the United States.

If it's the latter, the Biden administration is bound to be sorely disappointed. A sober reading of China's approach to Iran's misbehavior in the Middle East makes clear that Tehran's troublemaking now has Washington right where Beijing wants it.