

Iran, China and the challenge to U.S. hegemony

[By the Qiao Collective, published on the group's website, January 2020](#)

China is providing a crucial economic and political lifeline for Iran and other nations targeted by U.S. sanctions. The United States' so-called "trade war" against China could change that.

The renewed threat of outright war with Iran in the first weeks of 2020 has remobilized the U.S. anti-war left. On January 3, the U.S. deployed a targeted drone to assassinate high-ranking Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq. One day after, thousands of protesters rallied in dozens of American cities following a call for a [day of action](#) from the ANSWER Coalition (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism). Meanwhile, Democrats offered tepid criticism despite just weeks prior voting to [approve](#) President Trump's massive \$738 billion military budget and rejecting an amendment introduced by Reps. Khanna (D-CA) and Sanders (D-VT) that would have cut off funding for executive military action in Iran or elsewhere without Congressional approval.

Amidst these leftist and liberal contestations and despite a retaliatory Iranian missile strike on a U.S. base in Iraq, President Trump [called](#) for diplomacy and claimed the U.S. "is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it." The threat of further U.S. military action in Iran may be receding for the short-term. But the reality is that the U.S. was at war with Iran far before the strike on Soleimani—just not employing tactics of war recognized by many as such. Since the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 and reinstated sanctions on Iran that November, the U.S. has recommitted to a "hybrid war" designed to cripple Iran's economy and cut off the nation from international trade. This concept of [hybrid war](#)—which deploys disinformation, economic sanctions and coercion, and political manipulation to further U.S. interests without the use of military intervention—is crucial for understanding U.S. aggression against Iran and its significance in the larger world system.

The aim of renewed U.S. sanctions on Iran is clear: as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [put](#) it, they seek to "starve the regime", "accelerate the rapid decline" of its international trade and "restore democracy". Not only do the unilateral sanctions blacklist 50 Iranian banks and hundreds of individuals and target vessels, aircraft and Iran's energy sector, they [aim](#) to bring Iran's oil exports to zero by wielding the U.S.'s global economic dominance and threatening to penalize foreign corporations and states that continue to do business with Iran. As Pompeo warned: "If a company evades our sanctions regime and secretly continues" to do business with Iran, "the United States will levy severe, swift penalties on it, including potential sanctions." The impact of this U.S. abuse of power is nothing short of a humanitarian crisis: food prices quickly skyrocketed after the announcement of renewed sanctions, and testimonials from Iranian students, doctors, patients, and others have [described](#) severe limitations on access to education, medicine, and health care under U.S. sanctions. In a talk on security issues in Ufa, Russia, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani rightly [described](#) U.S. sanctions as a violation of national sovereignty and a form of "economic terrorism."

So why escalate military action when sanctions imposed by the U.S. and enforced by international financial organizations have already ravaged Iran's economy? One partial answer is Iran's deepening ties to China, whose injection of capital and pledges of military support have been a lifeline to a politically-isolated Tehran. The U.S. has become increasingly threatened by a new global political alliance led by China, Iran, and Russia and including countries like Bolivia, Venezuela, and Cuba. Strengthened through years of meticulous economic, military, and political cooperation and forged under shared circumstances of victimization by antagonistic U.S. foreign policy, this power bloc threatens to challenge U.S. hegemony over the global order.

First and foremost, Chinese-Iranian economic agreements have undermined U.S. sanctions and integrated Iran into a Chinese-led Eurasian economic zone which the U.S. deems an imminent threat. In 2016, Iranian President Hassan Rohani announced during a visit from China's President Xi Jinping that Iran and China had [created](#) a \$600 billion dollar, 25-year political and trade alliance. During Xi's visit, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated, "Tehran seeks cooperation with more independent countries" because "Iranians never trusted the West." The landmark deal made explicit that China provides knowledge-sharing and will [assist](#) in building critical infrastructure such as hospitals, railways, and roads in Iran. In September of 2019, the two countries updated the 2016 agreement which would include a \$400 billion investment focused in Iran's oil, gas, and infrastructure sectors—renewed U.S. sanctions be damned. Meanwhile, in early 2019, Chinese and Iranian officials announced joint cooperation in China's Belt and Road Initiative, a massive trillion dollar trade and infrastructure project linking markets in East and Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. (Iraq also [announced](#) its intention to join BRI in 2019, to the dismay of U.S. strategists.) China has even gone as far as to [turn off](#) its oil ships' radar and sonar technology when entering the Persian Gulf in order to avoid U.S. military detection and further punishment for "violating" U.S. sanctions. Amidst U.S. aggression against Iran and crippling sanctions that target medical supplies and kills countless Iranians, the political alliance and trade deal serve as a crucial lifeline for Iran and its people, providing the material basis for what Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [praised](#) as China and Iran's shared vision of sovereignty, peace, and mutual progress.

While China has proven an invaluable ally to Iran and its people, Iran—as an oil-rich nation located at the center of BRI's trade route—also presents a strategic ally for China. Shut out of Western financial markets, Iran has turned to China as an economic partner. And unlike U.S. economic terrorism designed to undermine political autonomy in Iran, the \$400 billion Chinese-Iranian deal simply [gives](#) Chinese state-owned firms the right of first refusal for Iranian petrochemical projects. (Ironically, the U.S. media insists that only one of these economic policies is predatory.) Given the U.S. government's grave trepidations about BRI's potential to decenter U.S. global economic hegemony, it would make sense that the U.S. seek ways to undermine Iranian-Chinese cooperation. U.S. leaders have already [pressured](#) allies in Europe and Asia to spurn Chinese investment and [threatened](#) to stop intelligence sharing with allies that accept Chinese Huawei 5G technology. Despite itself controlling world financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank whose structural adjustment loans have forcibly privatized and destabilized developing economies across the world, the U.S. has [decried](#) China's "predatory approach to investment" and warned allies to choose sides.

But Iran's ties to U.S. rivals such as China and Russia are not solely economic. Just days before the Soleimani assassination, Iran, China, and Russia [held](#) joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman, a

“normal military exchange” that reflected the nations’ “will and capabilities to jointly maintain world peace and maritime security”, Chinese defense spokesman Wu Qian said. Commander of the Iranian Navy Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi [stated](#) that the U.S. and some of its allied nations staged a failed military attempt to sabotage the joint naval exercise. And on January 6, Iraq’s Prime Minister welcomed Chinese ambassador Zhang Tao, who [conveyed](#) Beijing’s readiness to provide military assistance amidst U.S. refusals to cooperate with Iraqi parliament’s [demands](#) to withdraw.

Disappointingly, China’s consistent support for victims of U.S. economic terrorism has gone largely unnoticed by self-described Western leftists. The U.S. left in particular has failed to advance a systematic analysis that places U.S. aggression in Bolivia, Venezuela, Iran, and Iraq in relation, instead defaulting to a reactive, case-by-case resistance to various coups, air strikes, and aggressions as they occur. While U.S. anti-war advocates have quickly mobilized to respond to overt forms of imperial intervention—the use of military violence in Iran or its staging of the 2019 Bolivian coup, for instance—it has failed to connect the dots between these individual cases and the emergence of a global power bloc challenging U.S. hegemony, of which China plays a key and consistent role. Indeed, China has provided a recurring economic, political, and military lifeline to nations such as Venezuela (where China [remains](#) a major buyer of oil despite U.S. sanctions), Bolivia (where Evo Morales’ government [spurned](#) Western transnational companies to partner with Chinese state-owned firms to nationalize Bolivia’s lithium industry) and North Korea (where China [provides](#) crucially-needed food aid and has [advocated](#) for an easing of U.S. sanctions). These nations have attempted to survive U.S. sanctions, expel Western capital, nationalize key industries, and chart an independent course from the U.S. world order.

The U.S. left’s inability to understand China as a proven ally for nations struggling under the boot of U.S. empire is a massive strategic failure. Instead, U.S. progressives invoke “both sides” false equivalencies that equate a real and hegemonic U.S. global power structure with the vague, potential specter of “Chinese imperialism”. Under such an argument, Chinese economic lifelines provided to Iran, Venezuela, and other nations cut out of global markets by U.S. sanctions are simply an opportunistic power play, one which would replace these nations’ subjugation under Western imperial power under a new, ostensibly equally brutal, Chinese power. The fact that such facile elisions have found a foothold amongst the U.S. left has proven to be a critical weakness in its ability to mount more than a purely reactive response to present U.S. aggression. Certainly, skeptics will argue that China benefits from its economic ties to vulnerable victims of U.S. aggression, but that ignores both the obvious facts that mutual benefit is the foundation of all international relations, and that China has been consistently targeted with U.S. secondary sanctions, propaganda, and fear mongering for its audacity to challenge U.S. policy in the Middle East, Latin America and beyond. The U.S. left’s failure to challenge—and indeed its tendency to repeat—antagonistic rhetoric against China is fundamentally contradictory to its stated solidarity with nations such as Iran, Bolivia, and Venezuela.

Notions that China is seeking to “unfairly” benefit from brutal U.S. sanctions on nations like Iran miss the fact that the U.S. is escalating its own kind of hybrid warfare against China to punish China for daring to “violate” U.S. sanctions. Indeed, the U.S. has [repeatedly](#), [en masse](#) sanctioned Chinese companies and banks, both private and state-owned, for providing trade and aid to Iranian entities. Indeed, the so-called U.S.-China “trade war,” despite receiving little attention from the left, is part and parcel of U.S. attempts to undermine China’s ability to provide

assistance to Iran and other targets of U.S. hybrid warfare. With its explicit goals of undermining Chinese state economic control, [privatizing](#) key industries, and forcing China to [remove](#) restrictions on foreign capital and company ownership, the trade war threatens to destabilize China's role as an economic lifeline for Iran, Venezuela, and the rest of the Global South. The finance, oil, and mining industries—key targets for privatization under trade war negotiations—are crucial to China's ability to purchase Iranian oil and assist Latin American countries in providing alternatives to Western capital investment from their mining and natural resources industries. Without full state control over its finance, oil, and mining industries, China may lose control of these industries to Western companies and could ultimately lose the ability to act swiftly and leverage those industries to defy U.S. sanctions on oil and mining industries of Global South nations like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Iran. As U.S. media celebrate China's slowing economy and the material harm the trade war is causing Chinese people while salivating over the prospect of U.S. financial dominance over Chinese markets, it is becoming clear that a likely goal of the U.S. is to use the trade war not only to "open" China's state-owned domestic industries to Western investment, but also to undermine its leadership of the only geopolitical bloc that poses a real challenge to U.S. global hegemony.

What's more, the U.S. has used feigned concerns over human rights abuses as a trojan horse for its regime of sanctions against supposed "rogue states." Seemingly progressive [bills](#) such as the Hong Kong Freedom and Democracy Act, which received near-unanimous bipartisan support in the U.S. House and Senate, include provisions that would mandate Hong Kong abide by U.S. sanctions against Iran and North Korea, while giving cover to further sanction Chinese individuals and firms and ban Chinese actors from entering the U.S. The sole opposition in the House came from Thomas Massie (R-KY), who [stated](#) his consistent opposition to sanctions which "[meddle] in the internal affairs of foreign countries" and "invites those governments to meddle in our affairs." Supported widely by proclaimed progressive and leftist groups in the U.S., the legislation provides a textbook example of how the U.S. uses the language of democracy and human rights abroad as cover for retaliation against geopolitical rivals and to further its own human rights abuses through punishing sanctions.

It is important to note that this economic warfare has been coupled with the quiet escalation of the Obama era "pivot to Asia," which sought to contain China's rising influence through military and economic policy. The head of the Pentagon has [called](#) China his new "top priority," and in January 2020, the U.S. Army [announced](#) two new regional task forces that would combat the "strategic threat" of China through a focus on "non-conventional warfare" to create an "asymmetrical advantage" for the U.S. in the event of military conflict. The Department of Defense had previously designated the Pacific as its "priority theater," and conducts routine military drills in Japan and South Korea while [selling](#) \$2 billion in arms to Taiwan in 2019 alone. This escalation of U.S. military power in Asia under the rationale of "containing China" makes clear that opposing U.S. antagonism towards China is paramount for future hopes of peace and demilitarization in Asia and the Pacific.

In order to mount a serious challenge to American empire, the U.S. anti-war movement must understand the terms of engagement: economic terrorism through sanctions and political isolation and destabilization have become the primary modes of U.S. imperialism. Often obscured by overt acts of military violence, U.S. hybrid warfare waged against not only Iran but Venezuela, Bolivia, North Korea, and China is the primary contradiction facing the global

struggle against imperialism. For too long, U.S. critics of American empire have evaded the derisively termed “[China question](#)” in favor of false equivalences and the repetition of U.S. state talking points. But behind the Cold War rhetoric, China has proven itself as a strategic ally for countless nations with which U.S. leftists claim solidarity. Whether the U.S. anti-war movement will rise to oppose increasing aggression against China designed to undermine its ability to support Iran, Bolivia, North Korea, and all victims of U.S. imperialism remains to be seen.

* * *

From the Qiao Collective website: 'Qiao is a collective of Chinese leftists living in the diaspora. We aim to be a bridge between the U.S. left, particularly the Chinese diaspora left, and China's rich Marxist, anti-imperialist historical and contemporary political work and thought.'