

The Hegemony of Nations: Inter-Capitalist Monopoly-Conflict

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### Abstract

This paper will examine the question of the future of U.S.-Iranian relations by examining its place in the larger conflict between the U.S. and China. In doing so, the concept of hybrid realist-liberalism and its history in relevant countries will be examined, followed by an explanation of how hybrid realist-liberalism plays into the Marxist concept of monopolies. After a short discussion of how those monopolies function utilizing both liberal theory from Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and neo-Marxist concepts, this paper will examine the implications of this system in regards to whether or not the U.S. will go to war with Iran. Ultimately, it will be found, the answer to that question depends on who Iran decides to side with in the coming inter-monopoly fight between the U.S. and China.

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### Introduction

In order to survive as a member of the privileged power elite, the capitalist must successfully compete with his peers, a task that demands continuous accumulation. In this sense, he is a victim of his own inner drives and of the system in which he operates.

—Smulkstys, 1974

It is safe to say that when trying to study U.S.-Iranian relations, one can forgo listening to the rhetoric each side puts out about the other. This is because any public statement has surely been tailored to fit the sensibilities of that country's populace, and broken down into easy-to-swallow bits of information, devoid of the complexity and nuance that actually characterizes foreign policy. This is because there is no reward for being direct and honest. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon was skewered for his bluntness; during the 2012 Presidential election, President Obama was beset on multiple sides—by newspaper outlets and Congressman—calling him too “professorial,” and suggesting that he should be in a classroom instead of the White House (Kissinger, 1994; Gavin, 2012; Cardoza, 2011). It is not honest, sober statements that are rewarded, but powerful aphorisms that speak viscerally to people. Thus, they are useless for the purpose of analysis.

In order to understand, then, the future of the U.S. and Iran, one must know that this conflict is not actually about the U.S. and Iran. The conflict is actually about China—it is about the liberal ‘sphere of influence’ (perhaps better referred to by their Marxist name: ‘monopolies’) that the United States has worked since the end of WWII to build, and that China is quickly developing—it is about the fact that monopolies must continue expanding in order to survive,

consuming all in their path—and that two monopolies cannot coexist in the long term. No one factor is enough. And though the interaction of monopolies (and thus, the final estimate of the future) requires a descriptivist Marxist lens, this, too, is not enough. Consideration must go beyond pure economics, as Engels once expressed:

According to the materialist conception of history, the production and reproduction of social life is the *ultimate* determinate element in history. More than that neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence, if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, senseless phrase. (cited in Harrington, 1976, 44).

It is the interaction of between capital and power that creates the future. This is why there is little certainty about the future with Iran.

Iran is a growing center of power; and, as such, it is in an infantile stage of monopoly development, during which peaceful, positive-sum absorption into a monopoly is still possible. And, as one of the few stable powers in the Middle East, Iran could be a powerful ally, which is why both China and the US are trying to absorb it. The only known is that neither side will stop until Iran has decided to make their bed—meaning that Iran will either be a frosty ally, or a protected enemy. It should be noted that the possibility of army-to-army warfare is unlikely in the event of Iran moving into China's sphere of influence—being a nuclear-equipped power under the umbrella of China is what protects North Korea. But it would not rule out conflict by other means: nations have become quite adept at proxy wars through many mediums.

To understand why this is so, three primary facets must be examined: the genesis of the hybrid realist-liberal mindset, the structure of the ‘sphere of influence,’ and the theoretical implications of this for U.S./Iranian relations.

### **The Rational State**

The internal order of the USSR, as such, is not an object of our policy, although we do not hide our rejection of many of its features. Our relations with the USSR, as with other countries, are determined by its international behavior.

—Richard Nixon, Second Annual Report, 1971 (as quoted in Kissinger, 1994)

There is a well-known maxim in creative writing: “What you intend doesn’t matter; readers interpret only the text you’ve written.” The idea, *mutatis mutandis*, carries over to other areas, too, from law, to marketing, to government action. Examinations of events are often unconsciously predicated on this assumption, with good reason; when the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan turned into multi-trillion dollar quagmires, precious few asked the nation to step back and take into consideration what the Bush Administration had in mind when the decision to invade had been made. But the idea can, of course, be taken too far when too generally applied. It is an important, explanatory facet, but a facet nonetheless. Before delving into deeper analysis, this facet will be thoroughly considered.

This first section is primarily concerned with exploring the history of *intent* of decision-makers in the United States, Iran, and China, and developing an understanding of the *why* of spheres of influence. Although each of these nations claims to adhere to a particular philosophy—liberalism, Islam, and Communism, respectively—they are, irrespective of the

minutiae of government structure, believers in a hybrid realist-liberal intellectual tradition. It is not the same sort of belief as comes in religion or ideology, but an attitude of leaders who wish to cut through the red tape and get things done, who know, deep down, that any nation can be used to their advantage. They recognize how either attitude can be beneficial, depending on the situation.

### **A Short History of an Idea in the U.S.**

After the end of World War 2, the US found itself in the position of having the power to take on the mantle of ‘superpower.’ While the country had possessed Imperial ambition—explicitly so for a brief period at the turn of the 20th century, resulting in a war with Spain, and military campaigns against Filipinos and Cubans—for quite some time, the acquisition was a tenuous one (Carlin, 2013). This, the US government was well aware of. “[W]e have about 50% of the world’s wealth but only 6.3% of its population,” wrote the Policy Planning Staff of the Department of State in 1948, and that, furthermore,

In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality...and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives.

Wilsonian liberalism had not been chased out of the government, but realists quickly sunk their claws in. Breaking with tradition, the Truman administration “[made] open-ended alliances, provide[d] substantial aid to other countries, and deploy[ed] U.S. military forces abroad” (Nye, 2017). Thus began a period of uneasy cooperation between liberals and realists in the American

government, an alliance whose goal was the national objective of disparity-maintenance.

Because the USSR was out of the US's reach of influence, the country instead bound itself to Japan and Western Europe, where countries had been heavily affected by the war, opening them to outside assistance, and thus: molding. It was through this process that this curious alliance of influences would become almost inseparably intertwined. While liberals would argue that the purpose of extending US influence was in order to oppose Russia, which was synonymous with supporting the freedom of the liberal world order, and realists felt the purpose was to exert control over other nations to consolidate power and protect the disparity, they worked in tandem to reach the same goal: a global US sphere of influence (Nye, 2017; Chomsky, 2015, 55). More on the monopoly later. In the following years, the term 'stability' was adopted to describe the US's prime goal. The implications of this term were two-fold. Straightforward examination reveals an obvious truth: sudden shifts in status, regardless of what type, create uncertainty, which is problematic because of its negative effect on the market, the predictability of nations, and so on (Slovik, 2010; Kissinger, 1994, 721). This is why when, in 1969, when Soviet forces began harassing Chinese troops along their shared borders, Nixon stepped forward and warned the USSR that "the United States would not remain indifferent if it were to attack China;" perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these events was the fact that the U.S. and China, at the time, were not in contact at all, and "had had no diplomatic relations for twenty years" (Kissinger, 1994, 724). Ideology is only skin-deep. Secondarily, though, as with many terms adopted by the government, stability did not always entail its prescribed meaning, but sometimes instead meant: 'conditions favorable to us.' It was with this term that Washington justified the violent removal of regimes who did not go along with the US's wishes. Before the 1954

overthrow of Guatemala's democratic government by the CIA, one State Department official noted that the country had become "an increasing threat to the *stability* [emphasis added] of Honduras and El Salvador...its broad social program of aiding the workers and peasants...has a strong appeal to the populations of Central American neighbors" (quoted in Chomsky, 2015, 51). Guatemala was the first of many. This was the secret side of American foreign power. The public liberals, however, turned a blind eye to this unpleasant business and espoused the value of democracy unironically. Some of them genuinely believed it, too. This is how liberalism was kept alive—because neither it nor realism could be chased out entirely by opponents, they learned to live with each other, creating a fusion of the ideologies.

In his book *The Choices We Face*, President Johnson sings praises for Truman's post-WWII programs, from the Marshall Plan to NATO, arguing for international action because the US "has a fundamental interest in the way the world is organized," and, additionally, "[o]ur democracy, and our freedom, can be assured only if we and our allies and associates achieve a system of peace in the world." This is the concisest example of the marriage of liberalism and realism in American thought. Replace 'peace' with 'stability,' and Johnson's liberal sentiments are turned into a something that could have been taken directly from a Policy Planning report; either way, the meaning is the same.

Each President, of course, has their own predilections, shifting the rhetoric one way or another. Nixon, for example, was disdainful of Wilsonian idealism, and spoke of naked American interest, unattached to America's liberal exceptionalism—though this approach was a failure in the public arena; President Reagan would later present the same ideas in their Wilsonian context to great success (Kissinger, 1994, 705, 731). Regardless of *how* an



administration, speaks, though, the basic operating assumptions (e.g. that of American dominance) of policy-makers never changes. Maintenance of the sphere of influence is a given, because it is necessary to maintain the United State's position.

### **Iran and China**

After leaving office, I was told by some intermediaries that at least some Iranian officials regretted not having accepted our offer [of opening private talks]. The lesson for you is that Iran speaks with more than one voice.

—Albright, 2008

Here, the discussion will seem rather glib compared to the short history above, but the point, rather than to edify, is to show that both Iran and China act according to their own cost-benefit analyses and, privately, deal with international issues using the same language of power concepts as the U.S.

Though there have been ups and downs, the history of the U.S. and China generally reflects a mutual desire for stability, as well as both nations overlooking their supposedly opposing systems. This has been most obvious in the most recent decades: from the Clinton administration's attempts "to enmesh China in webs of interdependent relationships with the United States," to the mild, careful, and placating actions on both sides in response to a Chinese jet crashing into a U.S. reconnaissance plane in 2001, to the "positive" atmosphere in several 2009 gatherings and summits between Presidents Obama and Hu, despite the acidic rhetoric flung around by media (Sutter, 2010, p.150, 123, 166). This, of course, is not entirely surprising, considering that "China has become the world's second-largest economy in large part by embracing some features of liberalism" (Lind, 2017). But this dynamic is not a recent

creation—it always existed, as long as there were channels of communication between the U.S. and China: Kissinger (1994), writing on a secret 1971 meeting in Beijing, recalls

I could not have encountered a group of interlocutors more receptive to Nixon's style of diplomacy than the Chinese leaders. Like Nixon, they considered the traditional agenda to be of secondary importance, and were above all concerned with exploring whether cooperation on the basis of congruent issues was possible. (p.726).

Kissinger (194, p.727-728) writes fondly of the top Chinese officials, recalling multiple instances where Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping were perfectly willing to be frank and pragmatic in discussions, which Kissinger believed to be the product of a clear vision of their long-term priorities; even Mao Zedong himself “[t]o underline his emphasis on the *global equilibrium* [emphasis added]...dismissed his own anti-imperialist pronouncements as “empty cannons.” Even before Mao's death, in the height of China's Communist fervor, realist attitudes emerged in the government—ones that would later, with the emergence of Capitalist expansionism, merge with liberalism to form the same sort of union found in the United States. A combination of this realistic-liberal perspective and the China's rising status puts them in much the same position as the United States in terms of ability and desire to create a Sphere of Influence—the consequences of which shall be discussed in the following section.

Iran, though seemingly a tougher nut to crack, is not the irrational state that many nations like to portray it as. Although the society is overtly theocratic, there is room for reformers to make a difference: look to President Khatami, elected in 1997, who was the first in his role to visit foreign capitals, and to restore ambassadorial relations—this resulted in “trade, loan, and investment agreements from Europe,” though there were some limitations placed by

constitutional provisions; of course, the power of the conservative hard-liners in Khamene'i's camp should not be underestimated: later in that same year, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri called for "sharp reductions in the power of the leader," and was then placed under house arrest; crucially, though, he was allowed to continue making critical statements (Keddie, 2003, p.272, 270, 274). The fact of the back-and-forth alone is enough to show that while disagreement is suppressed, it can shine through. And allowing disagreement is critical in hybrid realist/liberalism because the relationship is one of a thesis and antithesis creating a synthesis.

Furthermore, reformers like President Khatami, by trying to create economic deals with other countries, shows that strains of liberalism—that self-replicating, ever-expanding process—does have its followers in the government. Iranian power is not limited to above-board agreements with countries—it exercises realist power-maximization in the Middle East: "With a low cost investment in the [rebel Houthi forces in Yemen], Iran has maximized its returns by extending its reach into Saudi Arabia's backyard" (Miller & Sokolsky, 2017).

Depending on the situation, Iran has clearly demonstrated its willingness to exercise both liberal and realist actions in order to further itself. It, like China, like the U.S., is interested in domestic stability and its place in the world far more than any ideology that it claims to subscribe to. When China violently suppressed the muslim minority in their country, Iran "remained silent," a diplomatic move which could be ascribed to a desire to not rock the boat because of their trade relations with China; Iran also maintains closer ties to India than Pakistan, and has long been "more sympathetic to the Christian Armenia than to Muslim Azerbaijan in their border disputes" (Tabrizi, 2017).

As stated beforehand: countries, in international affairs, are driven by self-interest rather than by ideology. Of course, what defines self-interest is defined by the government in charge—some are driven more by individuals, some more by party ethos—but such a topic is a mite too complex for this brief discussion.

### **The Sphere of Influence**

Examine the National Security Strategy of both the Bush and Obama administrations, released thirteen years apart to see the one fundamental assumption that defines America.

From Bush (2002):

Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom's triumph over [poverty, disease, war, and terror]. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.

From Obama (2015):

The question is never whether America should lead, but how we lead...Sustaining our leadership depends on shaping an emerging global economic order that continues to reflect our interests and values.

Notice the emphasis on American leadership of the world. All else in U.S. policy flows from this modern Manifest Destiny. That attitude is what truly defines a Sphere of Influence. All nations, to some extent, join the web of international relations with varying degrees of friendliness and hostility, or skewed power structures; what sets apart a Sphere of Influence is the position not as a partner in this web, but as a dominator—attempted or successful—over all others.

This concept is descended from imperialist attitudes, with obvious modifications; the methods and justification have largely changed, primarily a course-correction resulting from

evolving situations rather than from some moral or ideological push. This happened because “empire and any admission of imperialism...stand in the public pillory” (Thornton, 1965, p.6). Recall the public reaction to Nixon’s strategy of naked self-interest. As a consequence of this, judging true motivations is often quite difficult. More difficult still is explaining the true complexities of a Sphere of Influence. One of the prime difficulties is that there is a large divide between analysts and decision-makers—the former live with theoretics, looking for philosophies to act as signposts for the way the government *should* act, while the latter are pressed to do something, pushing the entire nation toward action by impulse (Thornton, 1965, p.47).

Success, in leaders, is generally determined by proximity to the end-goal, and not by the ideological purity of the path taken there. This is how the U.S. can simultaneously claim the 1989 invasion of Panama was well-run, despite civilian casualties in the thousands and intentional and systematic destruction of residential areas, while also championing human rights—what might seem to be a case of cognitive dissonance can often be a case of believing that the ends justify the means (Trainor, 1989; Peppe, 2014). The morning following the attack, President H.W. Bush justified it in an address to the nations as, among other things, a defense of democracy; he went on to commend the “brave” Panamanians who wanted peace, freedom, and democracy, and committed to working with the the new government—even mentioning his “regret” over the loss of innocent Panamanians in a sentence that elaborated no further (“Fighting...,” 1989).

Consequently, the analyst is always lagging behind, ascribing meaning and overlaying patterns or ideologies on the actions of leaders, which could be motivated by expediency just as easily as philosophy. Thus, to understand a state, a complex perspective is required: one that

takes into account not only the general philosophies and norms of governing, but also the invisible forces acting on individuals—political, economic, or otherwise. Here, unfortunately, the argument that follows largely does not take all these factors into account; in the interests of brevity, the focus will be on pure theoretical analysis. Thus, the conclusion that follows should not be considered an end in-and-of itself, but a preliminary hypothesis requiring further study.

Spheres of Influence function—the modern incarnation—in the world can be best understood with two paradigms. First, the liberal/realist perspective of Joseph S. Nye, Jr. to explain intra-monopoly relations, then a broader Marxist perspective to describe inter-monopoly interaction.

A final note: even without Marxist perspectives labeling specific phenomena, liberal/realists within the Sphere recognize that inter-monopoly politics is an entirely different arena, and their efforts to address that often result in the conditions studied by Marxist descriptivists. This topic will be further examined later.

### **The Internal Structure**

In today's hyper-connected world, it makes little sense to look at relations between nations in a vacuum, just as it makes little sense to try to boil down the catalysts for inter-state action to a singular factor. The effects of the Capitalocene—corporate interests, non-governmental organizations, etc.—are omni-present, having not replaced the old forms of state-authority, but rather merged with them (Sassen, 2012, p.194). This is the one-two punch of liberalism and realism, wherein either strain of thought can push action when the circumstances are in their favor. Understand that the entire world is a single web of relations. Individual pairs of states deal with each other in particular manners, depending on the most exigent factors. Nye

(2004, p.163, 156) calls this the spectrum of realism and complex interdependence (a form of liberalism predicated on directly opposing tenets of realism)—he calls the ends of the spectrum “ideal types,” explaining that reality falls between the two; the relationship between the U.S. and Canada is determined by their economic interconnectedness, and run by ideals of co-operation: complex interdependence; whereas the relationship between the U.S. and China during the Cold War was determined more so by military interconnectedness (the “mutual dependence that arises from military competition”), run by government officials worried about political capital and security concerns: realism. These relationships are not set in stone, and move up or down the spectrum depending on the existing state of affairs.

Within this web exists the Sphere of Influence, which, as mentioned before, is defined as a state where a central state has ascended to the position of superpower, and actively leverages that advantage to propagate their power. It is worth mention that nearly all relationships are skewed in power to some extent—what sets the superpower apart is that the power is *always* skewed in their direction. This is not to imply that a nation always gets their way—take the U.S. conflict in Vietnam as a prime example of a stacked deck failing to produce results—but that the superpower holds the most concrete economic and military power, which tend to be the most visible factors. In addition, even though a Sphere of Influence is said to exist *within* the web or relations, it encompasses all nations. This is because a superpower generally has, to whatever extent, relations with almost all countries, but is not included in every relationship those nations have. This world-wide obsession can be driven for different reasons—most often a desire to expand power, or at the very least, to not diminish it (Thornton, 1965, p.6). Defining what power is exactly is a tricky subject, one that gets to central question of International Relations theory:

how to define power? This question is important, because with its definition comes a prescriptive theory of how empires can maintain power, or conversely how that power can be subverted. It is also constantly changing, and, for this paper, irrelevant.

In this, though, a curious phenomenon appears when examining the relationship between China and the US. As evidenced by the above paragraph on Nixon-era Sino-American relations, both nations have had a long history of being level with each other; furthermore, this relationship continues to today: Albright (2008, p.197) wrote that the two countries see the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship, even if there is not a lot of trust; at the same time, however, Albright adds “we are nervous about China because we don’t know what the upper limits of its influence will be.”

This brings up an interesting dilemma. Though China has today has become a much more liberal country—in an economic sense, if not in many others—it has failed to be welcomed into the the U.S.-led international community. As Lind (2017) notes, “many observers now believe that efforts to integrate China into the international system have failed,” despite the fact that, concurrently, China is a permanent member of the UN security council, the second-largest funder of the UN peacekeepers, and advances their interests by copying existing practices—for example, establishing an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to play a very similar role to that of the International Monetary Fund (Nye, 2017; Feigenbaum, 2017). So despite the fact that China is playing by the rules of the game in such a way that the U.S. should be developing a more complex interdependent relationship with it, there has been a spike in anti-Sino sentiment, be it academic (see above) or populist (see Donald Trump’s presidential campaign). The reason



for this conflict cannot be explained with liberal politics. Instead, a macro-Marxist explanation of monopoly conflict is required.

### **Inter-Monopoly**

On the surface, inter-monopoly interaction seems relatively easy to parse. Especially in purely Marxian terms, because the philosopher himself never spent long on the topic, instead pursuing more micro-economic examinations in his more academic work. Most of the applicable inter-nation theory comes from the more polemic, though admittedly less academic, *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels (2012, p.77) touch on the subject in their explanation of expansionist policies, arguing that they are reactions to the regular crises of overproduction, requiring market growth for continued existence; this need, they explain, “chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe,” effectively presaging contemporary global capitalism.

While Marx and Engels did foresee this aspect of the future, their other visualizations, as Sassen (2012, p.196-197; 198) points out, have not come to pass, and the modern era has brought with it a new form of capitalist globalization; in this manner, the *Manifesto* is both necessary and obstacle to understanding the modern capitalist system, because while it is “one of the most powerful diagnoses of the expansion of the global capital market,” it also “fails to understand the political constitution of these processes, which are deeply political, even if in new and sometimes obscure ways.” In short, inter-monopoly conflict is necessarily Marxist, but strict adherence to original text can prevent true understanding.

The Sphere of Influence is not the same as that of the twentieth century, a lá the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, but a result of the expansion of liberal ideology into all forms of life. This new form—post-ideological in manner—at its base, is all about access and cohesion.

Access to markets and political decisions, and acceptance of the current world hierarchy. This can be seen in the fact that while the EU and Japan are powerful world players, they aren't threatening the current order—as Leffler observed prior to the fall of the Soviet Union: “neither and integrated Europe nor a united Germany nor an independent Japan must be permitted to emerge as a third force or neutral bloc” (as cited in Chomsky, 2015, p. 62). On their own, they would be a threat. But they play the U.S.'s game. In fact, they sometimes act as a single unit.

““A country is one of three colors: blue, red, or gray,” the Japanese journalist Hiroyuki Akita said in 2014...“China wants to turn the gray countries red. The Americans and Japanese want to turn the gray countries blue.”” (Lind, 2017).

China is playing the game. But they don't accept the current hierarchy, and that is what makes them dangerous. The Chinese government tries to draw U.S. allies like the Philippines and Thailand into their Sphere of Influence through liberal means, which threatens not the status quo, but the American Sphere of Influence (Niblett, 2017). Here it is worth mention that there is not status quo, per se, other than that of American hegemony. Going back to Akita for a moment: the Chinese are not the only “revisionist” power, because the US is trying to convert the gray countries, too; in Asia, the US has been courting new partners—namely Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam (Lind, 2017). Despite the fact that liberal countries do not often go to war with each other, it is clear that this inter-monopoly interaction is a new form of conflict.

### **Inter-Monopoly Conflict and Iran**

The relationship between the U.S. and Iran today is undeniably strained, as it has been for a while. The two nations are currently fighting a proxy war in Yemen, while the latter also extends aide to Hizbullah and Bashar al-Assad (though the question of what side the U.S. is on in

Syria is a complex problem); furthermore, it also offends U.S. allies, most notably Saudi Arabia, Israel, and even Turkey—the last of whom accused Iran of a “sectarian policy to undermine Bahrain and Saudi Arabia” (No blank..., 2017, Tabrizi, 2017).

In other ways, though, the two have made progress: the so-called Iranian Nuclear Deal still holds up, and despite President Trump’s bluster, it seems unlikely to be undone, not least of all because of Israel and Saudi Arabia’s support for it (Porter, 2017). Moreover, it is clear that direct conflict with Iran would be incredibly damaging—In 2007, Robert Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff routed a proposal by then Vice-President Cheney to engage Iran militarily; at that time, much of the U.S. fleet in the Gulf was at danger because of Iran’s anti-ship missiles; today, the threat they pose is exponentially higher (Porter, 2017).

There are precious few things that are sure about Iran. Here, only four assumptions will be made. One: as proven beforehand, Iran follows the basic tenets of hybrid realist/liberalism. Two: As seen by the fears of other Middle Eastern countries, it is clear that they are trying to expand their influence into other countries. Three: “Iran is a rising, sable power that can’t be ignored;” and four: “Iran is not a powerhouse. They need to keep expanding their economy” (Miller & Sokolsky, 2017).

According to this paper’s definition of a Sphere of Influence, it is clear that Iran aspires to be a power like China or the U.S., indicating that they have the attitude, if not the means. But Iran is not a threat—though it has the potential to be—like China is to the U.S., and vice-versa; this is because Iran has the potential to be an ally much like Japan or the EU is to the US. While Iran must expand, it can do so in a positive symbiotic relationship with a more powerful monopoly, like the aforementioned states, rather than as a antagonistic nuisance.

As is abundantly clear from the case of Saddam Hussein (among many others) the U.S. is willing to accept dictators in the name of stability (Chomsky, 2015). It is also clear that some moves in the U.S. are being made toward some form of reconciliation toward Iran through the Iran Deal, which, despite Trump's bluster, is showing no signs of an early death—perhaps because neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia wants that (Porter, 2017). Though it may be too early to tell, it is possible that Trump's foreign policy in the region will be much like Obama's: in an interview, Gopal, a journalist whose reporting focuses on Syria, points out that Trump's strategy in fighting ISIS has thus far been the same as Obama's. Additionally, as the inside details of the Trump administration emerge, it is becoming increasingly clear that Trump is not interested in being personally involved in policy-making, instead relying heavily on advisors for making decisions (Scahill, 2017; Gordon, 2017). While this could presage a shift—especially because Trump is relying most heavily on generals—, only tactical changes, and not strategic ones have been made thus far. Being survey-level work, this paper is only dealing with evidence that is, not evidence that could be—something that should be kept in mind when reading the analysis contained within. Thus, though it is clear that there are forces pushing for peace with Iran, the ultimate attitude of U.S.-Iranian relations has yet to be set in the era of Trump. Until that point, there is not enough evidence to assess how strongly the U.S. will push to get Iran on-side.

While the U.S. may be held back by popular rhetoric and a long history of antagonism with Iran, China is limited by no such issue of public opinion and has been using this opportunity to build stronger economic relations. In January of 2016, President Xi, during a visit to Tehran, pledged to “increase bilateral trade more than ten-fold, to \$600 billion, over the coming decade;”

in the same year, Chinese importation of Iranian oil jumped up nearly twenty percent from 2015 (Berman & Schanzer, 2016).

Despite this head start, it is still too early to tell what, if anything, will come of this, much like it is with the US. Because China is not the only country that is now investing deeply in Iran, it seems that they do not “have much influence over Iranian behavior” (as cited in Berman & Schanzer, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Though there is a lot of saber-rattling around Iran, it is clear that the wind is clearly blowing in their sails. The nation does walk a fine line—few, if any, of the most powerful players and blocs want a new polar of power emerging and challenging current status quo in an already war-ridden and unstable Middle East—but it occupies a position where it could potentially lead to a major source of conflict between China and the United States, if it were to become more powerful in the region.

It should be qualified, though, that their rise is not a certain event. Although foreign business is not coming in to invest with Iran, the benefits have largely not trickled down to the people—in March, 2016, only 46% of Iranians believed that the country was in a good economic situation, down almost ten percent from the previous year; at the same time, conservatives have been protesting the reformist policies, worrying that they will create a dependence on the west (Glenn, 2016). If the hardliners have their way, and reverse the liberal course that the country has been travelling on, it is feasible that their presence and importance will be greatly diminished. Around two-thirds of Iranians support more economic engagement with the west, though, and

the reformers continue to do well in elections, which may be the sign that this current path will be the one that Iran walks well into the future (Glenn, 2016).

But—as has become common refrain now—it is too early to tell.

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