

Iranian President's Visit to China Advances Strategic, Cultural Dialogue

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

When U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rushed off to Beijing at the end of June, to try to put a foot in the door of the exciting Asian developments, capped by the Inter-Korean Summit, she was probably not amused to discover, that President Mohammad Khatami of Iran, with a 170-member delegation, was paying a state visit to China. Iran, after all, is a former "rogue state," recently re-catalogued as a "state of concern."

It must have been Albright who was in a state of concern, when she found out about the nature, and outcome of Khatami's June 22-26 five-day visit. For, it pushed that process of Asian integration, which is the nemesis of geopoliticians like Albright, and strategic cooperation, one crucial step further. And, in so doing, it further altered the strategic geometry, bringing Iran very firmly into the overlapping configurations of regional arrangements, including the ASEAN-Plus-Three, and the China-Russia-India strategic triangle, within the broader context of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

The visit was noteworthy not only for the concrete agreements signed by the two governments, in virtually all fields, but also, because it constituted an important contribution to the dialogue of civilizations, which the Iranian President has proposed be the framework for political intercourse at the highest level.

Sovereign Economic Cooperation

China and Iran are the two pillars of the Eurasian Land-Bridge (often alluded to as the "New Silk Road"), which stretches from China, across the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, and the Caucasus, into the Middle East, and Africa, as well as the Balkans and Europe. Iran's participation in the great project accelerated in 1991, as it recognized the independence of the Central Asian Republics, and initiated fundamental transportation infrastructure cooperation with them, which culminated in the 1996 opening of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway link. Filling in that missing link made the transcontinental network complete. Since then, Iran has been advancing transportation networks, within the country, and abroad, and has utilized institutions such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), of which it is currently the rotating chairman, and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), comprised of the Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, and founding members Turkey, Iran, and Paki-

stan, as vehicles for furthering economic cooperation along the Land-Bridge.

Iranian-Chinese relations constitute the axis for this transcontinental cooperation. Thus, both countries have been engaged in diplomatic activities, geared to upgrade, consolidate, and expand their joint efforts in this direction. At the same time, they have consulted on ways and means to remove the obstacles to that cooperation, coming from the threat of terrorism, and drug-trafficking, emanating mainly from Afghanistan. Both countries continue to be actively engaged in seeking a political solution to the catastrophic Afghan war, and to uprooting the drug menace which has been financing it.

In November 1999, then-Vice President Mohammad Hashemi visited Beijing, and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan returned the visit in February of this year. Former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had also visited China, when in office.

Thus, the visit by President Mohammad Khatami, though his first, continues a process already in motion.

Khatami arrived in Beijing on June 22, where he and his 170-member delegation, were greeted officially by President Jiang Zemin, and other officials, in Tiananmen Square, to a 21-gun salute. Jiang Zemin praised Iran, and Khatami, for having introduced a détente policy, which has led to improved relations with its neighbors, and Europe.

At the top of the agenda, was increased economic cooperation and trade between the two nations. With the Iranian President and government officials, was also a large delegation of businessmen, industrialists, and others. Parallel to the political talks in Beijing, a conference took place in Shanghai, on "Iran-China Commercial and Investment Opportunities," involving the Export Promotion Center of Iran, 200 representatives of Chinese companies, and the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines (ICCIM). They discussed expanding trade, from its current level of \$1.347 billion per year. A similar conference took place in Hong Kong on June 26, with 190 Hong Kong managers and representatives of 60 Iranian firms.

One important deal announced, was an agreement for China to establish and equip the fourth line of the Tehran subway system. The work will begin in March 2002, and will last eight years; the Chinese company will invest \$500



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (left) shaking hands with a Chinese official during a visit to China's Great Wall. President Khatami's trip to China strengthened strategic cooperation and cultural exchange.

million, half of which will go to Iranian participating companies. The same company will issue \$29 million in credit and another \$100 million, for construction of two other subway lines. China has already been engaged in building the Tehran metro network.

Five letters of agreement were signed, for vast economic, technological, scientific, and cultural cooperation.

Beyond the economic advantages both countries will reap from such trade expansion, there is a crucial political point which both the Iranian and Chinese leaders made. That is, that their bilateral trade relations are mirrored by fundamental agreement on leading international political issues, and the principles underlying them.

This was explicit in the joint communiqué, issued on June 22, following the meeting of the two Presidents, in which they addressed bilateral as well as international issues. Among the latter, they dedicated significant attention to the situation of Iraq. They "stressed the necessity to implement all the UN resolutions on Iraq to the full, and expressed their deep sympathy with the Iraqi people over their sufferings." In the communiqué, they "expressed support for Iraq's independence and its territorial integrity and stressed the importance of letting the Iraqi people decide on the fate of their country on their own." Such a statement is extremely important, considering the fact that China, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, has veto power over continuing sanctions, and considering that Iran was engaged in a brutal eight-year war against Iraq, during 1980-88, which has left deep scars in both peoples. Furthermore, there have been attempts recently, on the part of the Anglo-Americans, to manipulate Iran into endorsing the overthrow of the Iraqi government.

Jiang and Khatami also emphasized the principle in-

involved, in saying that they "opposed interference in the internal affairs of other countries by any country under the pretext of human rights, the politicizing of the human rights question, and adoption of double standards on this issue." Both Iran and China have been victims of such interference, and continue to be.

The other major international issue was Afghanistan, on which they agreed on the "need to seek a political settlement through negotiation between the parties concerned and establish a broad-based government representing all factions and all ethnic groups." They voiced their support for the work of the UN and the OIC in this regard.

The third international issue addressed, was terrorism, and its twin, illicit narcotics trafficking. They condemned both, and called for "the international community to combat and root out terrorism."

On the nuclear issue, the communiqué said that both are "committed to a world free from nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons," and stressed the need to eliminate and prohibit weapons of mass destruction, and to apply this "permanently and indiscriminately . . . with no exception." Importantly, "at the same time both sides took note of the legitimate rights of any country for peaceful uses of nuclear energy, chemical, and biological technology in a transparent manner under the supervision of the relevant international organizations." Iran has been under Anglo-American pressure, to abandon its nuclear energy program, and countries cooperating with it, like Russia and China, have been threatened with sanctions.

With reference to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, both supported the realization of a "comprehensive, just, and lasting peace," which can be attained only by recognizing Palestinian rights, including the right of refugees to return to their homeland. The region, they said, should be declared free of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, they "emphasized that the security and stability of the Persian Gulf should be safeguarded by the countries in the region free from outside influence." This is a clear reference to the continuing presence of the British and U.S. military there.

Iran reiterated its adherence to a one-China policy, which was appreciated by Beijing. Both sides said they support "multi-polarization," and expressed the "need to establish an equitable, just, fair, and reasonable new international political and economic order that is free of hegemony and power politics and is based on equality." They indicated their "readiness to work together for the establishment of such a new order." And, the two said that the international community should work for cooperation, and against "use or threat of force and imposition of economic sanctions to settle disputes between countries."

This shared outlook was underscored by a meeting between Iranian Defense Minister Vice Adm. Ali Shamkhani and his Chinese counterpart, Gen. Chi Haotian, in which they expressed their concern, according to Shamkhani, about their "national independence in international decision-making."

Dialogue of Civilizations

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the visit, was the philosophical meeting of the minds that occurred. In their joint communiqué, the two Presidents placed special emphasis on the importance of engaging in the “dialogue of civilizations,” which the UN has endorsed for the year 2001, on the initiative of President Khatami. They “agreed that China and Iran, two great ancient civilizations in Asia, should enhance exchanges and cooperation in the cultural, educational, and social areas, to develop and substantiate the dialogue of civilizations.” Furthermore, they “maintained that the Silk Road had laid a solid foundation for cultural exchanges between the ancient civilizations of Iran and China in the west and east of Asia, and that revitalization of the Silk Road would contribute significantly to consolidation and development of the cultural, art, tourist, and people-to-people exchanges and contacts between the two nations.”

The dialogue of civilizations was also the subject of talks between Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ayatollah Mohajerani, and his Chinese counterpart, Sun Jizheng, on June 22. Mohajerani opened a three-day seminar on Persian language and literature at Beijing University, with 100 outstanding Chinese scholars of Persian.

In a gesture highlighting the importance placed by Iran on this cultural exchange, Khatami donated 10,000 books on Iranian studies, Persian literature, and Islamic studies, to the Beijing University library.

In addition, the Iranian national orchestra performed in Beijing and Shanghai, for the first time.

The dialogue of civilizations has been the trademark of President Khatami’s government, since he won a massive popular mandate in elections in 1997. He has elaborated the concept repeatedly, not as an academic idea, but as the principle on which he defines Iran’s foreign policy approach to every other sovereign nation. The basic concept, is that each nation should identify its greatest moment of cultural achievement, no matter how far back or how recent in history, and revive that tradition, as the means to shape its self-identity in relating to comparable periods of cultural flowering in other cultures. Ideally, each nation should strive to identify the history of contacts among great civilizations, and use such precedents, to redefine relations today, on the highest moral and cultural plane.

In a lecture delivered on June 23 at Beijing University, Khatami spoke of China and Iran as “two important cradles of civilization,” and asserted that the relation between the two countries “predates recorded history,” as documented in legends and myths. “Here we observe the amazing similarities,” he said, “between the Iranian epic tragedy of Rostam and Zohrab, and the legend of Li Ging and Li Noga in Chinese literature.” Even if one were to rely solely on historical documents, he said, “we can still demonstrate the existence of uninterrupted historical links between China and Iran as early as the third century B.C., though some

authentic researches link such ties as far back as the sixth century B.C.”

The historic Silk Road, he said, was the vehicle of cultural exchange, where “we can observe a striking spectrum of cultural and spiritual interchanges involving religions, customs, thoughts, literature, and ethics, which, on the whole, added to the vitality and vivacity of eastern culture and thought.”

Driving home the political implications of cultural dialogue, he said, according to the Iranian News Agency (IRNA) summary, that “the Chinese outlook has been instrumental in opening up the way to the fruitful and constructive historical discourses throughout the ages, due to its emphasis on the intellectual over the political, in an attempt to epitomize wisdom, temperance, and parsimony. Thus, he added, the inter-culturation between the civilizations of Iran and China has been invariably modelled on an age-old and common eastern mentality and similarity of attitudes, rather than on profit-seeking motives and short-term interests.”

Khatami said, “Emphasis on our long-standing close historical ties and dialogue among the great Asian civilizations, is a valuable instrument for the *regeneration* of thought, culture, language, and learning.” He regretted that Asian civilizations have distanced themselves over time, and become self-alienated, and called for reversing this trend, reviving the values of Asian civilizations. The Iranian leader, himself a scholar, made the point that “in Asian civilizations, *culture* has always been the core of the economic and political process,” and “therefore, we are compelled to give a more serious thought to the revival of our cultures than we did before.” He added, that such cultural revival would not only prevent their degeneration, but would “impede their assimilation by a domineering, unipolar global culture, economy, and politics.” He concluded, saying, “The future belongs to cultured, wise, courageous and industrious nations,” and wished success for “the intelligent, conscientious, hard-working, content, and artistic people of China.”

Defusing Ethnic and Religious Tensions

One of the most sensitive issues in China, has been the manipulation of religious groups, as insurgencies against the central government. Among these, is the Uighur minority, of Muslims living in Xinjiang province in western China, a group which has received priority treatment by geopolitical think-tanks in the West, as vehicles of destabilization. Thus, it is of extreme significance, that the Chinese government should arrange for an Islamic leader of Khatami’s stature, to visit Xinjiang, home to half of the country’s 20 million Muslims. In a clear effort to defuse ethnic and religious tensions, Khatami discussed with Xinjiang Governor Ebent Abd al-Rashid, areas of economic cooperation, especially gas and oil. “Pointing to the economic potentials and the natural resources of Xinjiang, Khatami proposed that the province could serve as a bridge connecting the grand China with the Central Asian and Muslim world,” reported IRNA. He added,

that “the relationship between China and the Muslim world, due to the strategic situation of China and the common interest of Muslims, could play a key role in improving the situation of this region.”

Not only through economic relations, but also through shared cultural and religious traditions, such cooperation could flourish. The visit to Xinjiang included meetings with Muslim scholars at the grand mosque in Kashgar, where the 12th-century Persian poet Sa’adi had prayed. Earlier, on June 23, in Beijing, the Iranian President had participated in Friday prayers at the Beijing mosque, built in 996 A.D. While there, he viewed the Persian manuscripts, and paid homage to two Persian scholars, Emaddodin Bokhari and Ahmad Bertani Qazvini, who were buried there, 700 years ago. When meeting with members of China’s Islamic Assembly, Khatami told them, the Silk Road is “a way linking the hearts between the nations of Iran and China.” He also urged them to respect the rights of the Chinese nation.

Asian Convergence Strategy

There is no doubt, that the successful encounter of the Iranian and Chinese government representatives, signalled further consolidation of the regional arrangements of cooperation—and self-defense—which have been proliferating in Asia. In his remarks to a business conference in Hong Kong on June 26, President Khatami outlined the case for including Iran in such arrangements, as a viable trade partner; he referenced the fact that his government has introduced economic reforms, and new measures for protecting foreign investment, and pointed to its vast raw materials resources, as well as its strategic location as a bridge to Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. These geographical factors, he said, meant that cooperation would go beyond Hong Kong and Iran, “to give them access to a market of several hundred million people in Western Asia and several billion on this continent as a whole.”

Emphasizing that Iran considers cooperation with Asia as a “macro-policy,” a cornerstone of its foreign policy, he outlined his view of the potential for cooperation of a strategic nature. “We genuinely believe that the Asian countries, with their past experiences and common, rich, and multifarious economic capabilities, their vast underground and immense human resources, are quite capable of institutionalization of an Asian Convergence Strategy.” He said, “Close cooperation of regional countries via manipulation of each others’ potentials for the purpose of development, along with the Asian Convergence Policy, will be both feasible and to the benefit of all parties.” This cooperation, he said, in the event of financial crises, “can act as an invincible fortress, drastically reducing the ominous impact of such crises.”

In other words, Iran has become part and parcel of the regional combinations that have come into being in Asia, and has adopted an Asian Convergence Strategy.

It is no coincidence that Khatami’s China visit, largely

ignored by the major Western press, was carefully followed in the Asian press. The press inside Iran hailed the event as a great step forward, singling out the fact that China is an independent country, and does not allow itself to be dictated to. The conservative *Kayhan International* also lauded the Chinese for having welcomed Khatami in Xinjiang, pointing out that such developments would counter outside attempts to manipulate religious issues. The *Iran Daily* called the visit a “momentous development,” and commented, “countries like Russia, India, China, and Iran have well understood that the theory of a ‘new global order’ and ‘unipolar system’ is truly inefficacious and cannot make strategic Asian cooperation deteriorate.” It said, that therefore, “these powerful and important countries continue to be capable of forming a reliable economic and political ‘security belt’ in the volatile region.” This idea of an Asian convergence, “will be the cornerstone of the future,” according to the paper. It added, that it is essential that “long-term and strategic Beijing-Tehran ties assume an effective and constructive part in the cultural, political, economic, and military systems of today’s world.” Cooperation on the Silk Road, it said, would reinforce Asia’s “long-forgotten vital role in global equations.”

Japanese media, and India media also, highlighted the visit. The New Delhi-based *Pioneer* highlighted the fact that Khatami was the first Muslim leader to visit Xinjiang.

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