

# Iranian Digital Diplomacy Towards China: 2019 as a Turning Point

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SPECIAL SECTION: SINO-IRANIAN RELATIONS FROM  
TENTATIVE DIPLOMACY TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

IRANIAN DIGITAL DIPLOMACY TOWARDS  
CHINA: 2019 AS A TURNING POINT

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## Introduction

Digital diplomacy, the use of digital tools within the diplomatic realm, is a methodological concept used to explain the efforts or actions that one political player directs at another, through the use of cyberspace. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this trend even stronger because of restrictions on travel and social distancing. This article focuses on one case of digital diplomacy – Iran's use of China's social media platforms as a means of broadcasting publicly tailor-made messages to China. China and Iran's growing relationship is of particular importance, in light of the China–US trade war. In today's world, China, as an international superpower and Iran as a regional power with strong ambition, play important roles in the new world order and challenge the position of the US. Such work will deepen the understanding about this growing relationship as well as contribute to the understanding of digital diplomacy and messaging strategies in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) era.

This study employs accepted qualitative research methods used in the study of policy diffusion processes via social media, as well as studies on the behaviour of new social movements in this arena. The findings and discussions in this article are based on the analysis of Chinese digital sources including 625 entries of the Iranian embassy's official account on Sina Blog, 1,055 entries on its official account on Sina Microblog, 259 articles on its WeChat public account, and 17 videos on its official account on Douyin as well as numerous secondary sources.

## **Digital diplomacy**

In this study, diplomacy is defined, following Raymond Cohen's phrase, as the "engine room" of international relationships.<sup>1</sup> "Digital" pertains to every effort or action that is based on computers and the communication between them in cyberspace. Digital diplomacy thus emerges as a new means of diplomacy which includes all use of cyberspace so as to achieve or maintain diplomatic objectives. This study will investigate digital diplomacy through the lens of soft power, which in this study means the ability to set the agenda in world politics by convincing, enticing and attracting others through the force of one's beliefs, values and ideas. The increase in cyber power and the ICT era are some of the major factors that have most affected diplomats and diplomacy in modern times.

The possibility of "doing diplomacy" in a new dimension (the cyber dimension) is nothing less than a revolution that allows groups and individuals to communicate in significantly different ways than before. Cyberspace and ICT are offering all countries, no matter how developed they are, a new window of opportunities for efficient diplomacy. Social media, a key feature of the digital era, has changed the way countries relay their messages by supplying the infrastructure for trans-world connections. In addition, social media allows for the distribution of messages to a wide audience in a relatively easy, efficient and cost-effective manner. In light of the current social media revolution, where the general public has the capacity to influence political discourse, it is crucial for diplomats to in turn influence public opinion on both a local and global level.

## **Past Western dominance in service of present relationship**

Though China and Iran did not establish an official diplomatic relationship until 1971, nowadays the parties often characterise their relationship as

“2,000 years of friendship, cooperation, and trade”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, both parties tend to emphasise that they are two of the world’s oldest nations, the successors of ancient dynasties with relations dating back to the Tang-Sassanid era. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a spin-off of the ancient silk road that started in China and passed through Iran, has added new meaning to this relationship and led the parties to repeatedly highlight the symbolic value of this initiative as an act of reinstating shared history. Part of the Iranian messages analysed in this study reflects this trend.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-imperialist background and earlier shared history coupled with mutual solidarity have all supported the political relationship between these two sides. After the Iranian Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was ousted and Ruhollah Khomeini announced the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the Chinese took no more than three days to recognise the new regime, demonstrating their quick adaptation to the new situation.<sup>4</sup> Since Iran started coping with Western sanctions, China’s stance in support of Iran’s nuclear programme has become the cornerstone of the diplomatic relations between them, reflected in China’s voting pattern on the UN Security Council.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, China and Iran share a sense of victimhood and exploitation by the Western world order. Decision-makers in both countries have adopted narratives which accuse the international order as being unjust, on the grounds that that global affairs are controlled and manipulated by the Western powers to their advantage. Furthermore, leaders in both countries seek to protect the legitimacy of their regimes in an international system that was designed in accordance with what they see as being Western values such as democracy and human rights. This Western dominance on the global stage has led China, together with Russia, to consistently support Iran’s right to nuclear power.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the affinity between the countries is reflected in presidential visits, such as Xi’s visit to Tehran in January 2016 and the reciprocal visit to Beijing by the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, in June 2018.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, the sides signed a 25 year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement during Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi’s visit to Tehran on 27 March 2021.<sup>8</sup>

Iranian diplomacy after the Islamic revolution focused on spreading the message of revolution. However, because of China’s prohibition against all religious movements, Iranian diplomacy understood in 2019 that they must strongly respect this in order to maintain their relationship with China. This has been demonstrated in reduced Iranian references

to the spread of the Islamic revolution in China since then. Instead, Iranian diplomacy tends to highlight their mutual background with other countries that suffer from western sanctions and demoralisation, in particular Russia and China. Therefore, in many cases, the Iranian message includes expressions such as: “hypocrisy”<sup>9</sup> and “double standards”.<sup>10</sup> By stressing these kinds of messages, Iranian diplomacy aims to place Iran in the same category as these other countries in order to evoke more support and understanding for their situation.

In addition to the diplomatic aspect of the Iranian – Chinese relationship discussed thus far, these two countries also share economic ties founded on the Chinese demand for energy resources Iran has to offer and the Iranian demand for finished goods and need for trading partners in both the oil and natural gas industry, denied from them because of Western sanctions. As a result, while in 2011 around 10 per cent of China’s total oil imports came from Iran, which accounted for 80 per cent of all Chinese imports from Iran that year, by 2017 this share had fallen to 7 per cent,<sup>11</sup> reaching a significant low in 2019, when Chinese oil imports from Iran fell to merely 3 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

As this research shows, in 2019 Iran expanded its use of digital diplomacy and made it more optimised and efficient. One possible explanation for this is the Iranian leadership’s understanding of how important and influential digital diplomacy is in support of, among other matters, the returning to previous levels of China’s previous oil consumption which can potentially be achieved efficiently and cheaply through the use of social media.

## **An overview of the platforms used by the Iranian Embassy in China in its digital diplomacy**

The Iranian Embassy in China has used four critical platforms for its digital diplomacy in different periods and there is a distinct change in how they use these platforms, from low-level activity to fully utilising the potential functions.

From 20 August 2011, when the Iranian embassy posted the first-ever entry on Sina Blog (新浪博客) to 4 July 2014, the Iranian embassy used Sina blog and Sina Microblog (新浪微博) as the main platforms to carry out its digital diplomacy in China. On 4 July 2014, without any announcement or explanation, the Iranian embassy stopped updating on

both platforms. Nevertheless, after almost five years of silence until 2019, the Iranian embassy re-activated its Sina Microblog account and adopted WeChat Public Account (微信公众号) and Douyin (抖音) (Chinese Tiktok) platforms for its digital diplomacy in China. The number of platforms has increased as they identified developing trends in social media use in China, the different methods of interacting with the Chinese public, and an increased desire to utilise them for this purpose (see Table 1).

## Aims of Iranian digital diplomacy in China

The Iranian Embassy in China stated on its WeChat public account and Sina Microblog account that their duty is to strengthen the friendship between China and Iran.<sup>13</sup> This friendship is intended to be not only between the two governments but also between the public from both sides. This central aim of their digital diplomacy strategy is outlined in a Sina microblog that states, “despite limited resources, we still hope to do our best to open accounts on different social media platforms to bring the people of Iran and China closer and closer”.<sup>14</sup> They hope that “Chinese social media platforms could serve as a new interactive channel for public diplomacy between Iran and China and build a spiritual bridge that connects two old and great civilizations”.<sup>15</sup> These are the aims presented in Iran’s official narratives but their activity on Chinese social media is not always consistent with these aims. During the period between 2011 and 2014, its digital diplomacy in China seemed to neither prioritise the bilateral relations between Iran and China nor attempt to influence the views of the Chinese public towards Iran. In

Table 1 Platforms of digital diplomacy of the Iranian embassy in China towards Chinese public

Account name	Platform	Active time	Total amount of entries	Followers
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Sina Blog	20 August 2011–4 July 2014	625	105
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Sina Microblog (Sina Weibo)	28 November 2011–04 July 2014 20 June 2019–present	<b>1,055</b>	<b>406,369</b>
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Tencent -WeChat Public Account	14 July 2020-present	259	Not shown
Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran	Douyin (Chinese TikTok)	04 February 2021–present	17	341

Statistics collected by 16.00 Beijing Time, 18 June 2021.

contrast, since 2019, its carefully tailored digital diplomacy towards the Chinese public shows a significant shift towards influencing public opinion in China towards Iran and therefore further enhancing the bilateral relations between Iran and China.

According to the content posted on the Chinese social media platforms, Sina Blog and Sina Microblog from August 2011 to July 2014, the purpose of the Iranian Embassy's digital diplomacy in China during this time was to merely convey the core messages about its Islamic teachings, Islamic Revolution and current developments, foreign policy pillars including Pan-Islamism, Pan-Shia unity, anti-Americanism, anti-Israel, anti-external intervention and self-reliance to the Chinese public.<sup>16</sup> These core messages are mostly conveyed within the form of speeches or statements by prominent figures in Iranian domestic politics, including Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Islamic Parliament of Iran especially then-president Dr. Ali Ardeshir Larijani, Imams who deliver the Friday Prayer Sermon in Tehran, the president of Iran, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, Iran's Foreign minister, and others. It shows no clear agenda or preference for which camps' (moderates vs. hardliners) policies and doctrines towards certain issues they intended to present to the Chinese audience. The Iranian ambassador and other officials in the embassy in Beijing were side-lined during this period. They were mostly responsible for transferring and translating such information from domestic media and news agencies such as Islamic Republic News Agency, Iranian Student's News Agency, Fars News Agency, and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, which resulted in the absence of the voices that are most familiar with Chinese audience.

When Hassan Rouhani came to power, his administration initiated a new foreign policy principle of "interacting with the world".<sup>17</sup> This new foreign policy principle was also mirrored in the Iranian Embassy's digital diplomacy in China from the beginning of his presidency until 24 June 2014. To build a new national image of a dynamic, non-isolated, and friendly country, the Iranian Embassy displayed many entries of mutual visits, exchanges, and cooperation between Iran and various actors in the world on both Sina Blog and Sina Microblog. European countries especially France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Qatar, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia remained the priorities in the international relations of Iran. There were multiple high-level bilateral or multilateral interactions between Iran and these countries. The prominence of these countries in

Iran's strategic, political and economic calculations were implied in the wording and tone of the content presented on its official accounts on Sina blog and Sina Microblog.

The bilateral interactions between Iran and China did not assume a prominent role in the content of the digital diplomacy of the Iranian Embassy during this period. China fell in the circle constituted by economically important countries for Iran, such as South Korea and Japan. There were only 8.64 per cent of blogs, and 7.33 per cent of microblogs presented online during this period that related to China or the bilateral interactions between Iran and China. Most of these limited bilateral interactions presented on Sina Blog and Microblog were confined to the areas of trade, energy, infrastructure construction, and technology. The delegations of such bilateral interactions were correspondingly ministers or deputy ministers from Ministries of Transport, Agriculture, Commerce, Industry, Minerals and Trade, Education, and R&D from Iran and China. Most of the content was about strengthening economic cooperation between Iran and China, such as *China participates in the construction of Iran's Qom-Isfahan high-speed railway*<sup>18</sup> and *China will invest 8 billion euros in Iran's steel industry*.<sup>19</sup> China assumed little strategic or political importance for Iran during this time compared to EU states, neighbouring states, and Russia. There were five articles about *A Glimpse of Iran-China Relations Before and After the Islamic Revolution* on the Sina Blog during the Ahmadinejad administration. Nevertheless, the ones about political bilateral relations, "China's foreign policies towards the War launched by Iraq on Iran"<sup>20</sup> and "China's stance towards the Iranian nuclear issue" for example were blocked and are not available online anymore.<sup>21</sup>

Besides, during this period, the bilateral interactions between Iran and China were mostly overseen by low-level officials such as prefecture-level meetings and agreements. Iran and China attached great importance to the exchanges between cities. Thus, a number of entries were about the prefecture-level bilateral meetings between Iran and China discussing the potential cooperation according to their relative advantages and complementary resources. For example, the Deputy Governor of Isfahan Province Ali Risa Hamdanyan and the Deputy Governor of Guangdong Province met on 29 April 2014, discussing possible cooperation between the two sides in handicrafts and textiles.<sup>22</sup> It was not until Iranian President Hassan Rouhani came to Shanghai to attend the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014 that high-level bilateral meetings such as the presidential



meeting and the foreign ministerial meeting appeared. However, the descriptions and expectations of the bilateral relationship between the two sides were relatively mild. They expressed the willingness to see that the bilateral relations between Iran and China were strengthened and look forward to further cooperation between the two sides on various issues.<sup>23</sup> Such an abstract statement without any concrete exchanges shows that the importance of China in the international relations of Iran was rather limited during this period. Correspondingly, the Iranian Embassy in China did not make a great deal out of such high-level meetings but simply mentioned the information on its Sina Blog and Sina Microblog accounts.

EU states and companies rather than China and Chinese companies played a more prominent role as ideal partners for Iran in the content of the Iranian Embassy's digital diplomacy in China under Hassan Rouhani's presidency. When the easing of sanctions on Iran became a possibility after negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue progressed smoothly in 2014, European countries rose in prominence as potential competitors for China over the Iranian market. Such content was reflected on the Sina Blog and Microblog of the Iranian Embassy in China. The language and tone of the content reflected Iranian officials' preference towards European states rather than China. For example, in a blog posted on 12 May 2014, they cited a report from Agence France Presse (AFP) saying that the prospect of a possible agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue put China in a dilemma. However, after the West imposed sanctions on Iran, Beijing became Tehran's main trading partner. Nevertheless, some European companies looked forward to re-entering the market to replace Chinese partners in the Iranian oil industry and in view of the lack of good-quality Chinese products with the sanctions lifted. Arsh Herat Angezi, one of the heads of Iran's "Fariquin" company that imports equipment from Japan, Switzerland, Germany, and South Korea, said that given quality issues, the Iranian market was not expected to continue to cooperate with China. Instead, he turned his attention to the West.<sup>24</sup> Such a post shows that Iranian officials warmly welcomed European companies to re-enter the Iranian market. This risked undermining the cooperation between Iran and China, implying that China was not even an ideal trade partner for Iran during this period, let alone a strategic partner. The Iranian embassy's strategy of posting such negative views about Chinese companies' role in the Iranian market unabashedly on Chinese social media risked the Chinese audience misinterpreting Iran's official view towards bilateral relations between Iran and China, which were in tension with its digital diplomacy aims in China.

Furthermore, Iran regarded the normalisation and improvement of the relations with EU countries as a sign of the success of the Rouhani government's foreign policy. There were many entries on the Iranian embassy's Sina Blog and Microblog account enthusiastically broadcasting that EU states valued the role of Iran as a potential partner in economic development and political relations.<sup>25</sup> The focus of these posts shows an effort to legitimise and enhance the Iranian national image on the world stage through its friendly exchanges with EU countries. It implies that Iranian officials believed that EU states had more weight and were more vocal than China in world affairs, which was significant for Iranian foreign policy. In a blog and microblog reporting the celebration event for the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic revolution held by the Iranian embassy in China, the title of this blog and microblog aimed at Chinese readers highlighted the attendance of diplomats from various European countries rather than Chinese representatives, which clearly shows the priority of the Iranian diplomatic work.<sup>26</sup>

After a period of silence between July 2014 and June 2019, the digital diplomacy carried out by Iranian Embassy in China on Chinese social media platforms has undergone significant changes. After analysing the content of Iranian Embassy in China on Sina Microblog, WeChat Official Public Account, and Douyin, we found that, unlike the relative absence of China in its past work, China is now the primary focus of the content. The significant shift in digital diplomacy strategy mirrors the increasing strategic importance of China in Iran's international relations.

Firstly, according to the content posted on the Iranian Embassy's Sina Microblog, WeChat Official Account, and Douyin platform, Iran attaches great importance to China's role in Iran's international relations and domestic development. The Iranian embassy said of the bilateral relations between China and Iran in the introductory chapter on its WeChat Public Account that "the relationship between two countries has been upgraded to brothers who care for each other from two friends who respect each other".<sup>27</sup> The 25-year strategic road map signed in March 2021 to intensify the cooperation not only in terms of energy, trade, culture, and technological development, but also expand to bilateral, regional, and international cooperation, is a sign of this developing relationship.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2019, there were multiple entries on Sina Microblog, WeChat Public Account, and Douyin about the high-level, multi-dimension, and multi-channel bilateral interactions between Iran and China discussing

strategic and economic cooperation. The Iranian Foreign Minister (FM) Mohammad Javad Zarif has visited China and met with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi multiple times, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting between the two on 10 October 2020, mentioned the translated Twitter content of FM Zarif on Iranian Embassy's Sina Microblog that "offline meetings in a special period are enough to show that both Iran and China attach great importance to the relationship between the two countries".<sup>29</sup> In 2019, Iranian FM Zarif had to leave the meeting with the French President Macron during the G7 Summit so that he could arrive in China and meet with State Councillor Wang Yi on time,<sup>30</sup> which shows that Iranian officials prioritise exchanges with Chinese representatives in its international relations. Apart from high-level bilateral meetings between the two sides, since 2019, the Iranian officials, especially FM Zarif and Iranian Ambassador to China Mohammad Keshavarzadeh, were very enthusiastic about being interviewed or even wrote articles on Chinese media such as CGTN, China Xiao Kang Net, People's Daily, and Global Times to communicate Iranian views and policies on various international issues and Iran–China bilateral relations with Chinese public directly. Compared with the polite, friendly yet abstract content of bilateral interactions between Iran and China presented in Iranian embassy's digital diplomacy from 2011 to 2014, the content of bilateral interactions between Iran and China broadcasted on various Chinese social media platforms since 2019 was concrete and the wording and tone were significantly warmer. The meetings and discussions between the two sides often relate to deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China, the Iranian nuclear negotiations, anti-unilateralism, Hong Kong, and similar issues.

Secondly, since 2019, the digital diplomacy of the Iranian Embassy in China has not only increased its content focused on the bilateral relations between Iran and China but also greatly increased the support and endorsement of the Chinese government's policies on sensitive issues criticised by the international community to highlight the solidarity between two countries against Western interference in domestic affairs of other countries. In multiple articles, microblogs, and videos, the spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Iranian Ambassador to China, and the Iranian Embassy itself issued statements in Chinese against the United States and other Western countries' interference in China's internal affairs such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong issue. They endorsed the relevant policies of the Chinese government.

For example, when the “re-education” camps in Xinjiang were exposed to the international community and were strongly condemned by Western countries, the Iranian ambassador to China Keshavarzadeh visited Xinjiang along with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) officials and diplomats from more than 20 countries from 30 March to 2 April 2021. During his trip, the Iranian embassy initiated a series of entries with the hashtag “The Xinjiang Diary of an Iranian Diplomat” to present the “reality of Xinjiang” on its official account on Sina Microblog, WeChat Public Account and Douyin.<sup>31</sup> The Iranian Ambassador to China Keshavarzadeh claimed that “some people fabricated sensational lies such as the so-called ‘Xinjiang genocide’. The fundamental reason is that they do not want to see China’s development and progress. What we have witnessed in Xinjiang is by no means ‘genocide’ atrocities, but efforts to ‘eliminate poverty’. It is because of such efforts that the lives of Xinjiang people are getting better and better”.<sup>32</sup>

The most recent example of such endorsements was that in an article on the WeChat public account of the Iranian embassy entitled “Iranian diplomats in China have had obvious ‘side effects’ after having Chinese vaccines”, in which the Iranian Embassy strongly praised China’s vaccines. They advocated using the Chinese vaccine by playfully suggesting that the “side-effect” of getting Chinese vaccines is to show off to everyone that they had Chinese vaccines. “Over 100 million vaccines have been vaccinated in domestic China and abroad. Such a large scale of vaccinations not only proves the safety and effectiveness of China’s vaccines but also reflects China’s commitment to providing the world with vaccines as a global public product”.<sup>33</sup> Such content also shows that the official perception in Iran no longer only emphasises the historical and economic ties between two sides, but also started emphasising a notion of shared values and a shared worldview.

## **Shifting its focus back to “People” in its digital diplomacy in China**

Iran claimed in its microblog that they try their best to implement public diplomacy on as many Chinese social media platforms to bring Iranian and Chinese people closer. However, between 2011 and 2014, the digital diplomacy of the Iranian Embassy was more of a one-way information dissemination channel that lacked any form of productive interaction with the Chinese public. Some Chinese netizens left comments online under the blogs and microblogs of the Iranian Embassy; however, the embassy

was extraordinarily passive and barely responded to these comments. Given that many blogs and microblogs during this period were political and radical in their focus, some comments from the Chinese public stated that “Iran should promote Persian culture” and “Poetry, movies, paintings, how the local people are doing ...”.<sup>34</sup> However, the Iranian Embassy did not actively respond to these suggestions and carried on with its style and content. Consequently, the Iranian Embassy in China received little attention and interaction with zero comments, reposts, or likes for most of its blogs and microblogs. The Chinese public was absent either as the target or the audience in its digital diplomacy on Chinese social media. Nevertheless, it has changed significantly since June 2019 as its digital diplomacy effort has specifically targeted Chinese audiences and there has been a higher level of interaction with those engaging with the content.

The carefully curated content produced since 2019 is exclusively targeted towards Chinese audiences and shows a stark contrast with the generalised and unfocused content posted previously. They closely follow what is happening domestically in China from political issues and hotly-debated social phenomena to cultural events, trendy topics and traditional Chinese festivals. Furthermore, they show an active desire to participate in discussions, integrate these topics and discussions into their public diplomacy content, and interact with the Chinese public. For example, “520” first appeared as Chinese Internet slang, meaning “I love you” and later became commercialised as an alternative to the traditional Chinese and Western Valentine’s Day. On 20 May 2020, the Iranian embassy joined the trendy topic posting about “520” on Sina Microblog, as another way to adapt itself to the local discourse and gave its definition of the “520”. It explained in its microblog that the “5” represents the “five-year plan”. 2020 is the fourth year of Iran’s sixth five-year plan and the final year of China’s thirteenth five-year plan. Thus, the development and growth of Iran and China as emerging market economies is an inevitable trend in history. The “2” represents “two thousand years of history” since the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian visited Iran during the Western Han Dynasty in China. The Silk Road intrinsically linked the two ancient civilisations and has left beautiful ancient stories of friendly exchanges. The “0” represents “cleared”. By fighting the COVID-19 pandemic together, they expressed the hope that both China, Iran, and the world could clear all the cases as soon as possible.<sup>35</sup>

In a microblog that was less than 200 words, the Iranian Embassy connected this trendy topic on Sina Microblog with the historical ties

between Iran and China, the current development of both countries, and the common challenges facing both countries. This presents the Chinese public with an image of Iran as being a long-lasting friend of China with a sincere understanding of and care for China. Such an astute strategy gained considerable admiration from the Chinese public. This particular microblog acquired 509 reposts, 755 comments, and 7201, which is much more compared with other posts. Many netizens stated that they were impressed by what they saw as the Iranian Embassy's excellent understanding of Iranian Chinese society, culture, and history, as well the efforts they made over the post. One comment said the "Iranian Embassy is indeed very professional, and they are also our good pal. Chinese people support Iranian people in fighting with US bullying".<sup>36</sup>

The other significant change in attracting and interacting with Chinese public is that the Iranian embassy uses as many ordinary people as possible from both Iran and China in their digital diplomacy on Chinese social media to develop its people-to-people diplomacy. On the one hand, they draw numerous ordinary Iranian people, especially those who speak Chinese or have experience living in China, to introduce culture, tourism, food, music, and everyday life of Iran by showing them in their videos. For example, there is an Iranian vlogger with 18,000 fans on the Chinese video-sharing website Bilibili (哔哩哔哩). His videos are popular on this website because he introduces to Chinese audience in Mandarin a highly-grounded street view of everyday life in Iran, which is very attractive to people who only know about the radical image of Iran from international news.<sup>37</sup> The Iranian embassy identified his potential and adopted his videos and put them on its WeChat public account and Douyin platform to attract a larger Chinese audience for their messages.

On the other hand, the Iranian Embassy also spotted Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) on Sina Microblog, recruiting or interacting with them to promote Iranian soft power and tourism. For example, the Iranian Embassy invited famous Chinese writers, journalists, and travel bloggers on Sina Microblog to visit Iran and record their experience in Iran on Sina Microblog. They hope that in this way they would be able to reach out to a greater number of Chinese people more effectively and get them to know Iran from a Chinese perspective. QinFeng, Vice Director of Hong Kong Satellite Television (HKSTV) with 15,419,156 followers on Sina Microblog, was invited to visit Iran and posted her travelling experience in Iran on Sina microblog. She described that "Iran surprised me, it is very secular and safe rather than radical, full of religious extremists and totalitarianism.

For example, young women have tattoos, plastic surgeries, and laugh at a woman who wears Chador. People born in the 80 s would complain to the 50 s at a party that they probably could still drink alcohol if the 50 s did not initiate the Islamic Revolution". The Iranian Embassy's official account reposted such microblogs on Sina microblog.<sup>38</sup> For the Chinese public, such an approach is more attractive, convincing, and engaging than the one-way information dissemination earlier used by Iranian officials.

## Conclusion

The Iranian embassy in Beijing has been showing in the last decade, and even more in 2019, a high level of understanding of the Chinese social media scene, as this article shows. It is essential to mention that it is a combination of two aspects in parallel: the technical level of a different system to that of Facebook, Twitter, Tik-Tok all well known in most of the regions of the world with access to the internet. In addition, such engagement requires a deep understanding of local Chinese nuances. However, until 2019, the embassy chose to use Chinese social media more as a platform to update the people with general messages about its Islamic teachings, Islamic Revolution, and foreign policies and principles as it did in every other place in the world. Iranian officials did not tailor their content for Chinese audiences. Nevertheless, since 2019, it has become more proactive with its messages.

Mohammad Keshavarz-Zadeh, the current Iranian ambassador in Beijing began to perform his duties as ambassador to China in mid-December 2018. Before being appointed as the ambassador in Beijing, he served as the director of the US Affairs Department in the Iranian Foreign Ministry.<sup>39</sup> Abdolnaser Hemmati, who served before him came with a different kind of background, and after he finished his time in China, he served as the governor of the Central Bank of Iran.<sup>40</sup> This change in the ambassador's character, reflects the change in the Iranian understanding of the nature of their relationship with China, from a focus on trying to expand the economic relationship to an even more essential need to obtain as broad political support as possible from China.

The roots of the change in the embassy's usage policy of the Chinese social media in 2019 resulted from the new understanding of the world order that the two ambassadors brought with them. During 2011 and 2014, the digital diplomacy in China by the Iranian Embassy clearly shows

that they had a package of options from EU states, neighbouring states, Russia, and new emerging states such as India and China. The EU served as a more ideal choice than China for Iran's economic and political consideration, and they were not shy to show it openly. However, things started to change when then US president Donald Trump withdrew from JCPOA, and EU states failed to save the deal which pushed Iran to lean more towards China. In a new world order in which China has become a superpower that is potentially a challenger to the US, Iran's eagerness to upgrade the bilateral relations with China is also highly evident in its digital diplomacy in China since 2019.

In the same year, the Iranian embassy stopped almost completely using any Islamic messages and rhetoric. Instead, Iran began to become an advocate and supporter of China's ethnic policy on Uyghur issues. The Iranians made this decision because they understand that the CCP prefers for this issue not to be discussed domestically. In so doing, Iran understood that it would be better to remain silent on certain topics that relate to China's core domestic national interests, although it is a very important component in their ideology. This decision was reflected also in the same year while in July 2019, Iran decided to be part of a group of 37 countries that issued a competing letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council that backed the CCP's policies in the Xinjiang region.<sup>41</sup>

Because of the Iranian embassy's greater efforts in implementing tailor-made digital diplomacy towards the Chinese public since 2019, it has received far more engagement from the Chinese side, indicating the relative success of its digital diplomacy in China.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, whether such a new way with solid interactive characteristics of diplomacy has fundamentally strengthened the official bilateral relations between Iran and China, the relations between the Iranian officials and the Chinese public, and the relations between the people from both sides is still too early to say.

## NOTES

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