

## **IRI demands China recognize its sovereignty over the islands**

**ARVAK Center comment, 10.06.2024**

02.06.2024 the Iranian Foreign Ministry has summoned the Chinese Ambassador to Tehran to protest Beijing's position on the title of three islands in the Persian Gulf that are the subject of a long-standing territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

The islands, known as Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa, are strategically important and became the subject of a dispute between the Arab monarchy and Iran following the decolonization of Britain's Middle Eastern heritage.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry's protest is linked to a joint Emirati–Chinese statement issued after the UAE leader Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's visit to Beijing. The document stated that the PRC “*expressed support for the UAE's efforts to find a peaceful solution to the issue of the three islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa through bilateral negotiations in accordance with the international law*”. The Iranian side felt that Beijing was questioning Iran's territorial integrity and sovereignty over the islands, which the UAE considers illegally occupied by Tehran.

Tehran's protests against Beijing over these Gulf islands are not new. The last time the Iranian Foreign Ministry handed a protest note to the Chinese ambassador was in December 2022, when a similar statement was signed by Chinese President Xi Jinping after the summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council between the Arab states and China held in Saudi Arabia.

It is noteworthy that at least twice Iran has sent a note of protest to Russia in connection with the latter's solidarity with the UAE's position on the islands. In July 2023, at the summit of the Cooperation Council of Arab States of the Persian Gulf and the Russian Federation, the Russian side signed a document similar to the one mentioned above, after which the Russian Ambassador to Tehran Alexey Dedov was handed a note of protest. Then, in December 2023, Iran's protest was expressed to the Russian *Charge d'affaires* in Iran after Moscow reaffirmed its consent to the process of peaceful settlement of the dispute over the status of the islands on the margins of the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum held in Morocco. In all these cases, by summoning the ambassadors to the Foreign Ministry, Iran demanded that the Chinese and Russian sides recognize “*Iran's eternal and permanent sovereignty over the islands*”.

Thus, Moscow and Beijing face a stalemate on this issue. On one hand, the UAE and the Arab Gulf states make the recognition of the disputed status of the islands a prerequisite for any political and economic cooperation with China and Russia. Iran,

for its part, demands unconditional recognition of its sovereignty over the islands. Under such circumstances, neither China nor Russia can expect to fully incorporate the key Persian Gulf segment into their geostrategic plans. Neither equidistance from the parties' positions, nor attempts to support any of them, will help to create a favorable environment for them to fully implement their ambitious plans related to the region's rich energy resources and logistical importance. If there is a disagreement over the status of the islands on the neckline of the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, the area will always be in a *de facto* permanent stalemate.

As shown by the alternating curtsies of Beijing and Moscow to both sides (after each note of protest, China and Russia had to assure the IRI of recognition of its territorial integrity), Beijing and Moscow have not yet found a formula for a balanced and definitive stance on the islands issue. And this once again confirms the effectiveness of British policy, which has managed to set and leave problems wherever the Union Jack, the flag of the colonial empire, used to flaunt; and for which there are no universal keys.