



PEACE AND SECURITY

CHINA'S GROWING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Iranian Perspective

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Following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran made its relationship with China a crucial part of its foreign policy, signing a 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2021.



Iran also aims to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to boost its economy by connecting to corridors across Asia, as well as by its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).



Iranian officials hold different views on the Iran–China partnership. Yet, while not expecting a vast military presence, Iran welcomes China's growing influence in the Middle East as a counterforce against US presence.

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INTRODUCTION

The culmination of China's role in the Middle East became evident in March 2023, when it successfully mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia, effectively ending a hiatus that had lasted for over seven years.¹ Over the past decade, particularly following the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's engagement with regional nations has extended beyond mere economic considerations, encompassing strategic interests as well. Since 2014, Beijing has signed strategic partnership or comprehensive strategic partnership agreements with 13 countries in the Middle East. Concurrently, the relationship between Tehran and Beijing is framed within the context of a 25-year strategic partnership agreement, signed in March 2021, which has elicited varied responses both domestically in Iran and on the international stage.

There have been extensive discussions regarding the extent of China's influence in the Middle East and its potential implications for regional security. Some argue that China's expanding diplomatic and economic engagement may pave the way for its increased security influence and military presence in the future.² On the other hand, some China watchers believe that the Middle East is not a high-priority region for China and that it does not seek to challenge the United States' role in the Middle East.³ While it is difficult to definitively determine which perspective is closer to reality, it is important to consider the perceptions of politicians in different countries within the region. Ultimately, the attitudes of local politicians will greatly influence whether China's presence in the Middle East is facilitated or hindered.

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze various aspects of the bilateral relationship between China and Iran, with a specific focus on the Iranian perspective regarding China's expanding influence in the Middle East. To achieve this goal, the paper will address the following inquiries: How has the relationship between Iran and China developed over the past decade? What are the key areas of cooperation between the two countries? How do Iranian policymakers perceive China's role in the Middle East, and how does China's

growing political influence in the region impact Iran's foreign policy? Additionally, what are the potential challenges and opportunities in the bilateral relationship between Iran and China? Through an exploration of these questions, the paper aims to enhance our understanding of Iran's viewpoint on China's presence in the Middle East and its potential implications for regional dynamics.

The paper continues as follows. The first section reviews Iran–China relations in recent years, highlighting the scope and extent of bilateral cooperation in various areas including energy and Iran's participation in Chinese initiatives such as BRI, Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). The second section delves into the various narratives that exist among Iranian politicians and scholars regarding the bilateral relations between Beijing and Tehran, as well as China's broader role in the region. It explores how the failure of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has led Tehran to adopt the *Look to the East* policy as its grand strategy. Finally, the third section examines Iran's expectations from its bilateral relations with China and the challenges and opportunities ahead.

¹ Qiblawi 2023.

² For example, see Nasr and Tabatabai 2020.

³ For example, Ghiselli 2023.

HISTORY OF RELATIONS

IRAN-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONS: OLD FRIENDS, NEW PARTNERS

Iran and China, both ancient nations and former empires, have a longstanding history of bilateral relations that dates back thousands of years. Official modern diplomatic ties date back to 1911. However, when the Chinese Communist Party seized power in 1949, the Tehran–Beijing relationship turned cold. Iran condemned China for supporting the Tudeh party, Iran’s Communist Party, and China also criticized Iran for adopting imperialist policies. In 1971, Beijing and Tehran resumed diplomatic ties. Bilateral relations continued after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. China’s participation in reconstruction projects after the Iran–Iraq War, and especially the shared opinion of Iran and China in opposing US hegemony, brought the two countries closer to each other.⁴

In 2016 during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Tehran, China and Iran decided to elevate bilateral ties to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership level and issued a joint statement specifying the roadmap to developing and deepening Iran–China ties in political, executive, human, cultural, judiciary, security, defense, regional and international domains.⁵ China’s partnership diplomacy is based on a hierarchical logic in which Comprehensive Strategic Partnership attributes to bilateral relations that are multidimensional, stable, long-term and beyond differences in ideological values and political systems. In general, China’s partnership contracts are divided into 24 types, the most important one is called Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination. Russia and China elevated their bilateral ties to this level in 2011. The China–Iran agreement, under the title of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, is at the sixth level of partnership agreements between China and other countries in terms of importance.⁶ Apart from Iran, China has signed the same partnership agreements with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Algeria in the Middle East and North Africa region.⁷ While other Middle Eastern partners of China have close ties with the United States, Iran is the only one that shares an anti-he-

gemonic viewpoint with China. If the tensions between Washington and Beijing intensify, Tehran is the only partner China can rely on to maintain access to its energy sources.⁸

Despite being labeled as strategic; the Beijing–Tehran bilateral relationship was not a significant component of Iran’s diplomatic apparatus until recently. The US decision under President Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018 marked a considerable turning point that bolstered Iran’s *Look to the East Policy*.⁹ The re-imposition of sanctions following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal led to the deterioration of Iran’s economic situation, sparking a new wave of social protests and criticism of President Rouhani’s moderate administration. Ultimately, these developments culminated in the 2021 election of ultra-conservative Ebrahim Raisi as the next president. The new administration, harboring distrust towards the West, viewed the pivot to the East as a strategic alternative to the JCPOA for safeguarding national interests.¹⁰

The shifts in Iran’s domestic politics occurred alongside broader regional and global developments. As power competition between China and the US intensified, senior Iranian officials came to the conclusion that the international order was tilting in favor of Eastern powers, particularly China. This prompted Iran to seek closer ties with Beijing as a means of securing its interests. Furthermore, regional countries, including those within the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), had expanded their ties with China following the US pivot to Asia, and Tehran did not want to fall behind them. These factors collectively led Iran to prioritize the expansion of its relations with China, positioning it as a cornerstone of its grand strategy.¹¹

In March 2021, during the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Iran, the two countries signed a 25-year Compre-

⁴ On China-Iran historical ties, see Shariatnia 2011, 58–63.

⁵ Official Website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2016.

⁶ Li and Ye 2019, 68.

⁷ Fulton 2019, 4.

⁸ Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2020.

⁹ Iran’s Look to the East policy is commonly seen as a strategy to build stronger political, economic and strategic ties with major Eastern powers, like China and Russia. The goal is to expand alliance networks and reduce Iran’s vulnerability to Western sanctions. The policy was first introduced during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency in 2005 and has evolved under subsequent administrations. See Azizi 2023.

¹⁰ Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2023.

¹¹ Ibid.

hensive Strategic Partnership agreement. While the *New York Times* stated that China had committed to investing 400 billion US dollars over 25 years in Iran in exchange for a steady supply of oil, no Iranian or Chinese authority confirmed such claims.¹² According to Iranian officials, this agreement has been implemented since January 2022.¹³ The content of the agreement has never been made public, although a Persian draft version was unofficially leaked in August 2020. According to this draft, the agreement consists of nine articles and three appendices. The main goal of the agreement is expanding bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy, banking, agriculture, trade, tourism and technology and promoting Iran's position in the BRI.¹⁴

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AMBITIONS AND JOINING THE BRI

Iran aims to join the BRI to establish itself as a crucial transit hub in the region and beyond. Thereby, Iran seeks to play an essential role in the regional and global transport network. By achieving this objective, Iran's crippled economy could be revitalized, and Tehran may safeguard itself against international sanctions by being an integral part of the global supply chain network.

The Belt and Road Initiative was launched in 2013 by President Xi to revive the ancient Silk Road and to connect China to Europe and Africa through Asia.¹⁵ The BRI traditionally consists of six land-based corridors and one maritime route that connects the South China Sea to the Mediterranean Sea through the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.¹⁶ Among the corridors, China–Central Asia–West Asia (CCA-WA) passes through Iran. Iran is also able to join the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has been the most developed among the Belt-Road corridors so far.¹⁷

In the report of China's State Information Center titled "Belt and Road in Big Data 2016", Iran was named as one of the partner states of the BRI.¹⁸ On November 1, 2018 Tehran signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Beijing to become an official country of the BRI.¹⁹ However, until recently, no serious action had been taken to involve Iran in this mega-project. In June 2022, Iran and Kazakhstan signed an MOU to establish a new international transit railway. This route starts from Kazakhstan, passes through Turkmenistan and Iran, and ultimately reaches Turkey. It has the potential to be integrated into the CCAWA corridor by con-

necting to China from the east. In order to encourage neighboring countries to use this transit railway, Iran plans to offer preferential tariffs.²⁰

Relaunching the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) railway corridor in 2021 is another measure that facilitates Iran's participation in the BRI. This corridor was first launched in 2009 in the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO),²¹ but it was stopped due to some technical problems. ITI can be linked to the CPEC.²² By investing in ITI infrastructure, Iran aims to substitute it for the Middle Corridor, which was first introduced by Turkey. The Middle Corridor starts from China, passes through Central Asia, crosses the Caspian Sea, and continues through the territories of Azerbaijan and Georgia towards Turkey. The Middle Corridor can weaken Iran's geostrategic position significantly.²³

Iran is also aiming to join CPEC by establishing a Pilgrimage Railway Corridor that connects Pakistan to Iraq and Syria through Iran.²⁴ In September 2023, after 20 years of negotiations, the construction of the 32 km Shalamchek–Basra railway began.²⁵ There are also other agreements, such as the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project²⁶, that have the potential to integrate Iran into the CPEC, but they are currently suspended due to economic sanctions imposed on Iran.

GLOBAL SECURITY INITIATIVE AND THE PERSIAN GULF DE-ESCALATION MOMENT

The resumption of Iran and Saudi Arabia diplomatic ties through China's mediation after a seven-year hiatus highlights Beijing's growing influence and role in the Middle East. Unlike the United States, which has special relationships with some countries in the region, China maintains diplomatic ties and conducts business with all actors, including Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the GCC States, and even President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This approach allows China to maximize its leverage by demonstrating its willingness to work with all parties, while also reminding them that it has alternative options.²⁷ China's successful mediation between Riyadh and Tehran can be seen as a practical demonstration of the GSI introduced by China in February 2023.²⁸ The initiative emphasizes China's alleged commitment to resolving disputes through peaceful dialogue and consultation, as part of

¹² Fassihi and Myers 2021.

¹³ Motamedi, 2022.

¹⁴ Secretariat of the Higher Mechanism of Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership 2020.

¹⁵ For more details on BRI, see Yu and Wallace 2021.

¹⁶ Ramasamy et al. 2017, 9.

¹⁷ Reisinezhad 2021, 218-219.

¹⁸ Vadlamannati et al. 2019, 38.

¹⁹ Nedopil 2023.

²⁰ Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2022.

²¹ Previously known as Regional Cooperation for Development(RCD), the ECO was renamed in 1985 by its founders, namely Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. The aim of this intergovernmental organization is to facilitate sustainable economic development in the region. See Ogutcu 2017.

²² Fayaz 2021.

²³ Akman 2019.

²⁴ Jahanasanat 2023.

²⁵ Mehrnews Agency 2023.

²⁶ On Pakistan–Iran gas pipeline, see Munir, Ahsan and Zulfqar 2014.

²⁷ Walt 2023.

²⁸ Tasnimnews 2023; Global Times 2023.

a non-interventionist approach with respect for all countries' sovereignty that Beijing seeks to portray on the international stage.²⁹ By engaging in diplomatic mediation between two regional rivals China strives to project an image of itself which augments its international credibility as a promoter of peace and stability and as a country that plays an active role in re-shaping regional security dynamics. Many in Iran view China's role as constructive in the changing geopolitical environment of the region and particularly in Iran–Saudi Arabia rapprochement. While previous rounds of negotiations had laid the groundwork for restoring bilateral relations, China's mediation was instrumental in facilitating its realization. China is also motivated to host a high-level summit between Iran and GCC members, as it pitched this idea early in 2023.³⁰

IRAN'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHINA-LED SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

Iran's *Look to the East* policy includes not only expanding bilateral relations with rising Eastern powers like China but also seeking membership in non-Western organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. Iran's permanent membership in the China-founded SCO is a milestone in Tehran's foreign policy. After 16 years of being an observer member, Iran's request for permanent membership was finally accepted in 2021, and in June 2023, Iran officially became a permanent member of the organization.³¹ The SCO – as the successor of the Shanghai Five mechanism – was established in 2001 to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism, promote regional stability and expand economic cooperation. It firstly included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.³² Over time, the SCO has developed into an organization that Beijing considers essential for its security interests. China has utilized the organization to expand its defense capabilities into Central Asia, conducting military drills and cultivating important diplomatic ties to enable power projection in Central Asia and beyond. While Iran may not reap any immediate benefits from this membership, Iranian officials see the SCO as a potential multilateral institution to strengthen regionalism and shape a non-Western regional order in Central Asia and beyond. Given the prominent position of Russia and China as two great powers with anti-hegemonic approaches in the SCO, Iran views the organization as a potential anti-NATO front that can counterbalance Western global influence.³³ Additionally, as a sanctioned country, Iran aims to rebrand its global image, break Western-imposed political isolation, and boost its economy by joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Considering the composition of the SCO, Tehran

believes it has the potential to deepen economic cooperation among member states and advance China's GDI.³⁴

According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the SCO is one of the main multilateral mechanisms for strengthening communication with BRI-partner countries as almost all permanent and observer member states of the SCO are participating in corridors of the BRI and have signed different agreements with China.³⁵ Following Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has shifted its focus towards expanding relations with neighboring countries and joining international transit networks as its primary economic development strategies. President Raisi, in his remarks in an address to the 23rd SCO summit, emphasized Iran's full commitment to supporting the Belt and Road Initiative and highlighted the SCO's potential to facilitate cooperation among member countries to develop regional transit projects.³⁶

²⁹ Xinhua News Agency 2023.

³⁰ Reuters 2023.

³¹ Official Website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2023.

³² Gao 2010.

³³ Saleh 2022.

³⁴ The China-proposed GDI promotes international cooperation in eight key areas in post-Covid world including food security, pandemic response and vaccines, financing for development, climate change and green development, industrialization, digital economy and connectivity in digital-era. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2015.

³⁶ Islamic Republic News Agency 2023a.

IRAN-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONS AND DOMINANT IRANIAN NARRATIVES: BALANCING US POWER OR A BARGAINING CHIP?

When it comes to narratives in Iran about China's global position and Tehran–Beijing bilateral relations, one should differentiate between Iranian public opinion and elites' viewpoints. According to a joint survey conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and IranPoll, some Iranians are hesitant about China's growing influence in Iran, but most Iranians (83%) agree China is important to their country.³⁷ Public concern about China's expanding influence in Iran is largely attributed to the decline in public trust in the government due to increased inefficiency in recent years, lack of transparency in the 25-year agreement, China's authoritarian political system, public perception of China's assistance to Iran in obtaining surveillance tools and negative experiences with low-quality Chinese goods in the Iranian market. These factors contribute to public reservations about China–Iran bilateral relations.³⁸

Iranian policy elites generally believe China is going to be a critical player in the Middle East and it is of great importance for Iran to get closer to China.³⁹ However, it is misleading to see Iran's foreign policy apparatus as a monolith even in circumstances where both the administration and the parliament are in the hands of conservatives and neoconservatives known as *principlists* (*Osolgarayan*). Although they have tightened their grip on power, Iranian policymakers are still divided over main foreign policy issues such as bilateral relations with China. In general, there are three groups with different attitudes toward the Iran–China strategic partnership among Iranian policymakers, and each proposes different foreign policy strategies to pursue.

The first group is made up of conservatives and neoconservatives (*principlists*, or *Osolgarayan*) who view Iran–China bilateral relations within the context of global power competition. They assess recent international developments to the detriment of the US and believe that a new global order is emerging in which China will replace the US, or at least another international bipolar system will emerge. They see great power competition as an opportunity to strengthen ties with China and maximize Iran's national interests.⁴⁰

The neoconservatives are mainly introduced by a faction known as *Stability Front* (*Jebheye Paydari*). Adopting a geopolitical viewpoint, they consider the Iran–China bilateral relationship as one side of a triangle, with the other sides being Sino–US relations and the US–Iran relationship. They believe that the biggest common denominator of Iran and China's foreign policy agendas is their anti-hegemonic attitude.

The neoconservatives analyze China's partnership diplomacy through the lens of American-style alliances. Based on the long-lasting history of great powers' presence in the Persian Gulf, they believe that as tensions between Washington and Beijing intensify so does China's willingness to increase its all-dimensional presence in the Persian Gulf. This is seen as an opportunity to challenge the US in the Persian Gulf. In other words, neoconservatives define the Iran–China partnership as part of a counter-containment strategy against the US in the Persian Gulf.

Traditional conservatives take a combined geopolitical and geoeconomic approach to the Tehran–Beijing bilateral relationship. After two decades of nuclear talks and disappointment in the JCPOA, conservatives believe that Iran should prioritize establishing a partnership with the second-largest economy as its new grand strategy. They advocate for attracting Chinese foreign direct investment to help Iran revive its economy, strengthen its regional influence and ensure the survival of its political regime. This viewpoint is prevalent among current administration officials, particularly within the foreign affairs ministry.

The second group emphasizes maintaining equal and cooperative relations with all major powers, including Western powers, Russia and China. They advocate for a hedging strategy, which entails actively engaging with multiple countries rather than favoring one over the other. They believe that Iran should avoid prioritizing the East over the West or vice versa and should instead pursue a balanced approach. This mindset was prevalent among officials in the previous administration,⁴¹ but it is now gaining traction among some conservative officials due to Iran's deteriorating economic condition and the urgent need to alleviate the pressure of sanctions.

³⁷ Smeltz, Farmanesh and Helm 2021.

³⁸ Hashemi 2022.

³⁹ United States Institute of Peace 2023.

⁴⁰ Sariolghalam 2023a.

⁴¹ Donya-e-eqtesad 2021.

Lastly, the third group places great importance on maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with China due to its growing economic power. However, they argue that Iran must reassess its foreign policy priorities and focus on resolving issues with the US and the EU in the first phase. They believe that the benefits of the Iran–China partnership can only be fully realized through the de-escalation of disputes between Iran and the United States, as well as among regional powers. In this view, the current 25-year agreement may only serve as a mere bargaining chip in nuclear negotiations, and its implementation is unlikely in the near future. Their proposed foreign policy strategy can be characterized as a form of bandwagoning with Western powers.⁴² This narrative is mainly supported by academic elites and some former diplomats and policymakers.⁴³

⁴² On bandwagoning strategy, see Lim 2020, 160.

⁴³ Khabaronline 2023.

CHALLENGES AND CHANCES: THE FUTURE OF IRAN–CHINA COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The signing of the 25-year Iran–China Agreement in March 2021 signifies Iran's commitment to a long-term strategic relationship with China. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has perceived itself as a key player in the Middle East and yet an outcast in the US-led regional order.⁴⁴ Regional developments in the last two decades, particularly after the Arab Spring, have allowed Iran to expand its reach and influence across the region. Iranian leaders believe that the US and European powers will never recognize Iran as a regional power, opting instead for a containment strategy against Iran. In contrast, China acknowledges Iran's significance in the Middle East and has given it due credit. As a result, Iran has integrated its partnership with China into its long-term strategic plans for the future.

Given Iran's status as a major oil producer and China's position as a leading consumer of fossil energy resources, it is clear that the primary area of cooperation between the two countries lies in the realm of oil and energy. In light of the ongoing economic sanctions – which will remain in place for the foreseeable future – Iran views exports of oil to China as an economic lifeline. China, on the other hand, sees it as essential for its own energy security to have long-term access to the oil resources of a Persian Gulf country that is not under US influence. Given the close strategic ties of other Persian Gulf oil producers, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with the United States, China is concerned that these countries may refrain from selling oil to China should tensions between China and the United States escalate.⁴⁵ At present, half of China's oil supply comes from Persian Gulf countries.⁴⁶

In addition to ensuring long-term oil exports, Iran also seeks to attract Chinese foreign direct investment to revitalize its energy infrastructure. The comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Iran is more complex than similar relationships in the region due to sanctions imposed on Iran. Major Chinese companies, like CNPC and SINOPEC, are restricted from investing in Iran's energy infrastructure sector. Additionally, China's current priority is to reduce investment

in heavy industries.⁴⁷ The agreement is still in its early stages and little information has been published about it. However, China's oil imports from Iran have increased significantly recently. In the first 10 months of 2023, Beijing bought an average 1.05 million barrels per day (bpd) of Iranian oil, which is 60% above pre-sanction peaks recorded by Chinese customs in 2017.⁴⁸ According to Reuters surveys and OPEC figures, Iran's oil production reached 3.17 million bpd in October 2023, which is the highest amount since Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and Washington re-imposed sanctions against Iran. China was Iran's main customer in October, importing around 1.45 million bpd of oil.⁴⁹ The increase in Iran's oil exports in recent months is due to Iran's success in circumventing sanctions and US inability to strictly enforce sanctions. In addition, in June 2023, some reports claimed Iran and the US had reached an interim deal according to that Iran would be allowed to export up to a million bpd in exchange for ceasing to enrich its uranium to 60% or greater purity.⁵⁰

Another part and parcel of Iran's *Look to the East* policy is its membership in BRICS+.⁵¹ The BRICS combination of emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), particularly the anti-hegemonic approaches of China and Russia have made Iran see this organization as a counterweight to Western institutions led by the United States, such as the G7 and G20.⁵² In this regard, President Raisi, in his meeting with President Xi on the sidelines of the 15th meeting of the BRICS group, called Iran's membership in the BRICS+ an opposition to US unilateralism.⁵³ While Iranian officials claim that Iran's membership in BRICS is a huge historical achievement, it is limited to a political achievement in the

⁴⁴ Ahmadian 2021.

⁴⁵ Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2020.

⁴⁶ Bradsher 2023.

⁴⁷ Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2021.

⁴⁸ Muyu 2023.

⁴⁹ Lawler 2023.

⁵⁰ Middle East Eye 2023.

⁵¹ BRICS has extended invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join the bloc as full members starting in January 2024; at times referred to as BRICS+. The primary goal of this initiative is to create a more robust coalition of developing countries and prioritize the interests of the Global South on the global stage. See Ismail 2023.

⁵² Sariolghalam 2023b.

⁵³ Islamic Republic News Agency 2023b.

short term. Due to the secondary sanctions imposed on Iran by the US and Tehran's refusal to ratify the Financial Action Task Force agreements,⁵⁴ Iran would not be able to have considerable economic interactions with BRICS+ states (apart from China and sanctioned Russia) at least in the near future.⁵⁵ Membership in BRICS+ means breaking Iran's political isolation and partially reviving its international image, which was severely tarnished after widespread civil protests⁵⁶ in 2022.⁵⁷ Iran mainly considers its BRICS membership as a strategic long-term investment, especially as competition between China and the US heats up and non-western international institutions gain a greater share in shaping the international order.

54 The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an intergovernmental organization responsible to establish laws and regulations regarding combating money laundering, financing terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It consists of four conventions, and Iran did not ratify two of them, namely the Palermo Convention and Terrorist Financing Convention. Since February 2020, FATF has put Iran on its blacklist, has identified Iran as a high-risk country and has asked all members to apply counter-measures to protect international financial system from these crimes emanating from Iran. See Financial Global Task Force 2023.

55 Sariolghalam 2023b.

56 While most Western states condemned Tehran's reactions to civil protests that erupted in Iran over the death of Mahsa Amini, China took a neutral stance, opposed US decision to impose more sanctions on Iran and condemned interference in countries' internal affairs under any pretext. See Tehran Times 2022; Shahidsaless 2023.

57 Shahidsaless 2023.

CONCLUSION

The 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between China and Iran is a key framework that will shape their future bilateral relations. It is a central component of Iran's grand strategy of eastern pivot. Iranian authorities envision a future world with a stronger Eastern influence and aim to improve Iran's sanction-hit economy by participating in Chinese initiatives such as the BRI and the GDI. By joining the non-western international organizations where China holds significance influence such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, Iran hopes to break the imposed isolation on itself and integrate into the emerging international order.

It remains to be seen how far the China–Iran partnership will go and what implications it will have for the regional order. US disengagement from Middle Eastern affairs has prompted speculation about the intentions of other major powers to fill the resulting power vacuums in the region. Russia has historically had significant interests in the Middle East and became an active external power in the region through its intervention in the Syrian war in 2015.⁵⁸ However, due to severe economic sanctions and the ongoing Ukrainian war, Russia's future role in the Middle East may be limited. China's great economic power has led regional countries to strengthen political ties with China and welcome its more active regional role. Iran views China's role in the region as a counterbalance to Western powers.⁵⁹ Iranian officials do not anticipate China directly challenging the US in the Middle East with military presence. However, they view China's growing political influence as a positive development that gives Iran more flexibility in its regional policies.

⁵⁸ Ghiselli 2022.

⁵⁹ Yazdanshenas and Saleh 2023.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
Bpd	Barrels per day
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CCAWA	China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
ITI	Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul railway corridor
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
RCD	Regional Cooperation for Development
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

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CHINA'S GROWING ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Iranian Perspective



Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tehran in 2016 when Iran and China announced the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Following former US President Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iranian officials made the China–Iran bilateral relationship through the *Look to the East* policy a crucial part of Iran's eastern pivot. They signed the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in March 2021, during China's foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Tehran, laying the foundation for cooperation in various fields, especially energy and transit infrastructure.



Iran also aims to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to boost its economy by connecting to various corridors across Asia. In this vein, Iran signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Kazakhstan to establish a new railway and is set to join the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through the Islamabad–Tehran–Istanbul (ITI) corridor and the Pilgrimage railway corridor. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will also enhance Iran's position in the BRI and strengthen ties with Beijing.



Nevertheless, Iranian officials hold different views on the Iran–China partnership, with conservatives viewing it in the context of global power competition between the US and China, while moderates seek balanced relationships with all major powers. In general, the mutual interest in oil trade is a key area of upcoming cooperation between Tehran and Beijing. While Iran does not expect China's vast military presence in the region, Iranian policymakers welcome China's growing political and economic influence in the Middle East as a counterforce against US presence, considering the latter an existential threat to Iran's regional interests.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/index.html>