

China's risky balancing in the Middle East

*- What lies behind the China-Iran strategic
partnership?*

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Growing rapprochement between China and Iran was only a matter of time. While Tehran got isolated by US sanctions and its sectarian-based regional hostility, China's Belt and Road Initiative and growing energy hunger valorised Iran's regional position in Beijing's eye. But despite correlating interests, China still pays special attention to keeping its deepening cooperation with Iran out of the headlines as Beijing's leading partners and oil importers from the region are such countries who are otherwise in serious animosity with Tehran. While China is balancing between its Middle Eastern partners and manoeuvring itself to become an inevitable economic power in the region (too), it is not just aiding Iran to break out from isolation. Still, it could also give it a significant advantage over its regional rivals. But China's offered benefits could also mitigate the compelling effect of the US's sanctions on Iran and hamper Tehran's willingness to compromise in the restarted negotiations on its nuclear program.

In March 2021, China and Iran signed a 'strategic partnership agreement for 25 years. The deal rapidly hit the headlines and was interpreted as another sign of how China is gaining ground in the Middle East. But also as a tool for Beijing to annoy the US with outflanking their sanctions put on Iran.¹ And however, China's Iran strategy is more complex – and even risky - than the warming ties between Beijing and Teheran surely cannot be underrated. It clearly shows that despite Washington's calculus, the Middle East should also be an arena of great power competition with China.

Isolating Iran

In 2015 nuclear talks in Vienna between Iran and great powers (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany and the EU) reached an agreement named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which put a cap on Iran's nuclear program for lifting sanctions long battered the country's economy in turn. Entering the JCPOA gave benefits for Iran in several means and created a more stable business milieu for foreign investors. Such as China.

The 25 years agreement, which was signed in 2021 between China and Iran, was announced years before, in 2016, as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Teheran. Making the agreement when sanctions and restrictions were lifted, it could be hard to state that initially, Beijing intended to delude US sanctions. But times have changed.

By 2021 as the details of the China-Iran agreement has been worked out political and economic milieu around Iran (too) merely changed due to the presidency of Donald Trump. The US President took a dim view of Teheran's regional adventures and support of terrorism and announced the policy of 'maximum pressure' against the Persian state. Trump also saw the JCPOA as a flawed, bad deal for the US and abandoned the agreement in 2018, reinstating severe sanctions on Iran and those who do business with the country. Sanctions hit hard on Tehran as US restrictions prohibit Iran's trade in gold, aluminium and steel. But sanctions also affected the oil industry, shipping, insurance and central bank of the Islamic Republic. International companies withdrew from the country to avoid stints; billions of Tehran's foreign assets have been frozen.² Iranian exports decreased almost by 70%, from 29336 million USD (2018 July) to 8938 million USD (2020 July) as most of its main export products – oil, natural gas and metals – has been sanctioned.³ While Iranian currency, IRR to USD, seems incapable to break out from persistent, above 40% high inflation rate.⁴

But 'maximum pressure' policy didn't live up to its expectations. Although it caused significant damage to Iran and isolated the country, it could not break the regime. Joe Biden decided to use more soft diplomacy to bring the Persians to the negotiation

table again; however, most of the sanctions remained imposed on Iran, and anyone tried to trade with them.

The China-Iran strategic partnership

But still, despite all restrictions, the strategic agreement was signed in March 2021 between Iran and China - the latter has become a challenger to the US in even more areas. By this time, China became less compliant with US sanctions than it had been so far (e.g. restarted its oil import from Tehran)

However, the official text of the “strategic accord” hasn’t been publicised yet – only a leaked one⁵ - it is believed to include economic, military and security cooperation for the next 25 years.⁶ According to NY Times’s report, China agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran, \$280 billion in Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical industries, and \$120 billion in road and rail projects for a cheap and steady supply of oil in turn.⁷ (At least \$6 cheaper than the Middle East benchmark with the option of delayed payment and paying in soft currency while flooding Iranian markets with cheap, low-quality commodity which treatment is seen as de facto colonisation by some experts⁸) Beijing also agreed to provide the technology, personnel, and other components to materialise projects, together with 5000 Chinese security personnel placed in Iran to protect Chinese workers and experts.⁹

And the agreement seems to be not forgotten ever since. At the beginning of this year, on 15 January, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian - in his first visit to China as foreign minister of the new Iranian government - after a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi announced that the agreement entered in the implementation stage.¹⁰ But with a few exceptions¹¹ no specific projects, investments or cooperation have been revealed or known from the last years, which may indicate two things:

One is that Sino-Iranian relations are indeed progressing, promising a massive grant of investment for Tehran, which seems to be essential for both countries – even if to a different degree.

But on the other hand, it shows that Beijing is very cautious to keep its cooperation with Tehran under the radar and not get too involved in Iran.¹² But it’s not just the US’s sanctions that could make doing business with Tehran too risky for Beijing.

China's risky balancing

There are several reasons why China seems unwilling to put all of its eggs in the Iranian basket. Foremost, because it can lose more than gain, Sino-Iranian relations could be hardly described as interdependent. While sanctions and decades of regional enmity almost totally isolated Iran, China has constantly developed relations and active cooperation around the Middle East, making Beijing think twice before getting too entangled with the Islamic republic.

In the same week in January, when Iran's FM flew to China, FM Wang Yi also held meetings with the secretary-general of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain – alongside with the Turkish foreign minister.¹³ It was one the most vivid manifestation of China's balancing act, which has shown how Beijing pays special attention to downplay its deepening relation with Tehran in the eyes of the Gulf countries - some of whom are in serious contention with Iran.

And China has billions of reasons to do so. Saudi Arabia alone provided 15.9% of China's crude oil imports in 2020, but Oman, UAE and Kuwait are also in the top 10 of Beijing's oil providers.¹⁴ It means Gulf countries gave more than 33% of China's oil imports, which in the meanwhile became the world's largest oil importer.¹⁵ It indicates that energy security to China become more ponderous than ever when Beijing cannot allow itself that the safe and continuous flow of oil from the Gulf for its crescent economy become distracted by any regional factions in the Middle East or to being seen as a supporter of any side in the regional rivalry.

Belt and Road above all?

But then why China is about to deepen its ties with Iran if it's that risky? One of its prime reasons is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's grandiose global infrastructure development project, the centrepiece of Chinese President Xi Jinping's foreign policy (see chart below). To illustrate the extension of the BRI, just from the region Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates are also committed to being involved in China's '21st century Silk Road' project. And this initiative which would link China with world markets through extensive land and

maritime trade route network across Eurasia and adjacent seas, valorised Iran's regional position in Beijing's eye.

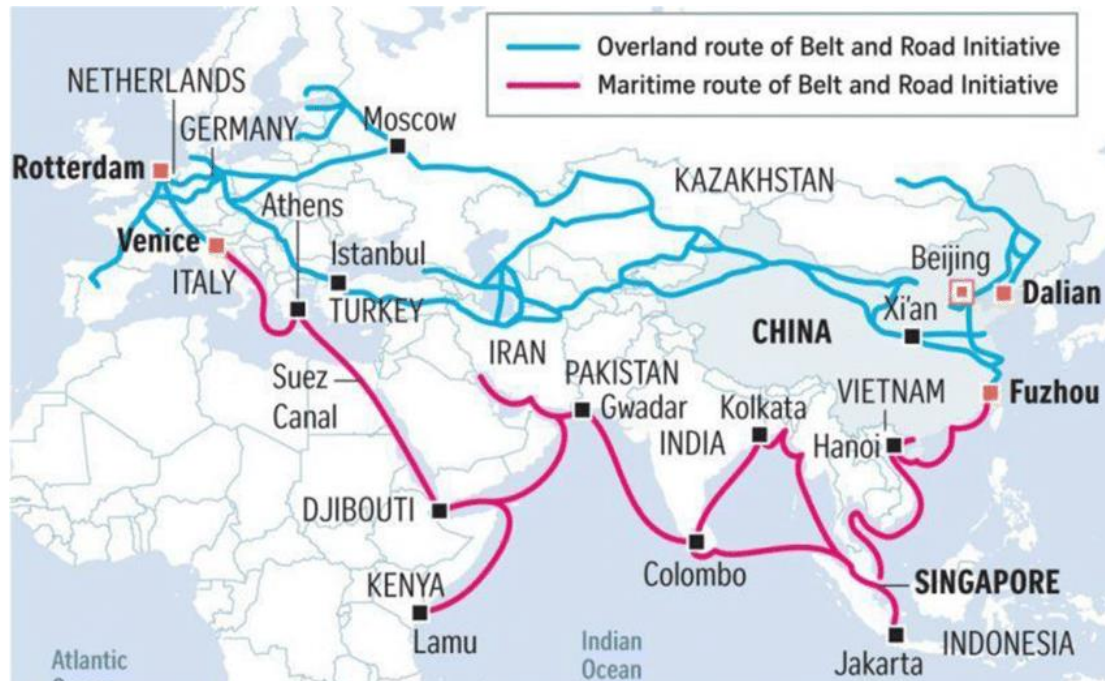


Figure1: The Belt and Road Initiative overland and maritime routes

Source: Bashir Muhammad Farhan¹⁶

Thanks to its geographical location Iran has become one of the vital land scenes of China's global strategy as one of the main overland routes to world seas from landlocked Central Asia and South Caucasus. Involving Iran in the BRI, China could dominate most of the trading routes from Central Asia to world markets. For Iran to be integrated into the BRI could give about \$1 trillion worth of investments to the country over 10-15 years which came right in time for Teheran to break out from international isolation and economic hardship.¹⁷

Beyond BRI

The assessment of Iran by China is also a pull factor for Beijing to gradually deepen its relations with Tehran and push the limits of its balancing approach. Iran is seen as an enduring nation-state from Beijing in a region hosting many failed and fragile states. A country that, however, fervently represents Islam as a Shi'a Muslim state

but could hardly find receptivity for its radical religious doctrine in China or Central Asian countries having a partly secular Sunni majority.¹⁸ Latter is a notable advantage of Iran in the eyes of Beijing over such Sunni countries as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan.

For Iran, China could also be a comfortable partner, among other things, for their similar views on the international order. They both oppose US hegemony and vocalise sovereignty in the Middle East, seeing US interventionism as responsible for regional conflicts.¹⁹ Tehran and Beijing also have no serious disagreement on key regional issues (e.g. both support Bashar al-Assad in Syria or One China). However, thanks to its pragmatic foreign policy China has good relations with countries belligerent to Iran. But this has not brought up any disaccord between them as China seems to be skillfully balancing between these regional players.

Another incentive or opportunity for Beijing to warm up its ties with the Persians was that despite Iran's inevitable geopolitical position and its relative stability, the country was left out from regional security and economic structures. However, this mainly comes from its sectarian-based hostilities in the region and nuclear program. Still, the US or, more broadly, Western sanctions put on Iran in the last decades could not be left out from the whole picture. These sanctions undoubtedly contributed to the regional alienation of Iran. Tehran's only opportunity to break out from regional and global isolation and economic hardship caused by US sanctions was to seek relations with such a country that alone can provide a significant financial advantage. A partner who is both powerful and daring enough to oppose American sanctions.

In other words, although sanctions and isolation seemed necessary by the US to regulate Iran, it may push the country into the arms of China in the long run. After almost 15 years of rejection to become a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – a Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance led by China and Russia – Iran's bid to join was finally approved in September 2021, which is a strategic opportunity for Tehran to break out from isolation and to deepen further its political, economic and military cooperation with SCO countries.²⁰

Hardliner's voices in Iran have long argued that Tehran should turn to East over Western countries and deepen its economic and diplomatic ties with Russia and China instead of a longing seek of the goodwill of the West. These voices became

even stronger after the US left the JCPOA, which the Islamic Republic interpreted as a total betrayal.²¹ After taking office in August 2021, the ultra-conservative President Ebrahim Rahisi and his administration have been spectacularly seeking to rebalance Iran's foreign policy and turn the country East towards Russia and China.²² And the latter - having more comprehensive plans in the region, e.g., BRI - is definitely taking advantage of this turn. However, some experts argue that currently, Iran has neither wherewithal nor resources to shift its foreign policy towards Asia.²³

And last but not least, signing the agreement with Iran and integrating the country into China's regional aspirations not just gave Beijing a remarkable push to become the predominant economic and political power in the heart of Eurasia. Still, it was indeed an opportunity for China to rile the US and fill the vacuum the US left behind in the Middle East. Billions of dollars on Chinese FDI, extensive infrastructural projects and increasing oil purchases from Tehran despite US sanctions²⁴ could boost the country's economy, which could undoubtedly undermine the effectiveness of US sanctions on the regime.²⁵ And China's timing to do so is just perfect (from China's point of view) and gravely dangerous at the same time.

China's strategy: hard play or smart play?

Looking at Iran's regional activity from the last decades, the Islamic Republic could likely use the additional revenue coming from China not just to recover its battered economy but to finance its assertive foreign policy in the region. It means the further development of its missile program, drones and supporting such terror organisations as the Lebanese based Hezbollah.²⁶ Involving Iran to the BRI project together with the 25 years agreement and the already existing Sino-Iranian military cooperation China could also give a serious advantage to Iran over its regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia.²⁷

But what could make Iran's regional rivals (such as Saudi Arabia, UAE or Israel) and the West more concerned is that growing Chinese support could undercut nuclear talks with Tehran restarted in Vienna, November 2020. Mitigating the compelling effect of the US's sanctions could hamper Iran's willingness to compromise in the Vienna talks. As one of the members of the former JCPOA and the restarted talks, China also criticised western parties US, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom,

for their lack of practical initiative and expressed its support for Iran's logical standpoint in the negotiations.²⁸ While to settle a deal would be more urgent than ever as Iran ramped up its nuclear activity and uranium enrichment significantly in the last years, causing growing concerns in US and Israel. Latter, increasingly sees pre-emptive military action as the only solution to prevent a nuclear Iran.²⁹

Although other experts believe the US and China have shared interests in nuclear talks, moreover, it appears China has made its economic support for Iran conditional on whether Tehran would return to the JCPOA.³⁰ It could be conceivable, knowing China's main interest in the region is the continuous, undisturbed flow of crude oil its economy stands on. Therefore, China is less likely to be interested in sharpening regional conflicts by a nuclear Iran. And prolonged negotiations would also mean the continuation of sanctions that impede Chinese investment. Clever, tactical measures by Beijing could explain why China's relation with the Islamic Republic is that carefully calculated and why Beijing maintained its economic support for Iran that smart way using it as an incentive for Iran to re-enter the nuclear agreement.³¹ But this standpoint seems more theoretical now, and only a revived JCPOA could verify such a Chinese calculation. But what is certain is that China has responsibility and could also have a significant role in pushing Iran back into an agreement as China is one of the few countries Iran has the trust contrary to the western powers, which can easily meet with Tehran's disillusioned scepticism during the negotiations.

Conclusion

Deepening Sino-Iranian relations could be beneficial for both parties. Beijing still has the intention to limit its cooperation with Tehran for severe reasons. While Iran - disenchanted from the 'West' - would turn to the east for a helping hand instead to be pulled out from its profound (economic) crisis China seems reluctant to put completely aside from its balancing approach in the region. Even if the Persian state is a key country in China's extensive Belt and Road project Beijing pays special attention to keeping its growing alignment with Tehran under the radar.

While manoeuvring between US sanctions and its main regional oil import partners (who is anyway in rivalry with Tehran), China is about to give a remarkable opportunity to Iran to break out from regional isolation – an opportunity the country

has never received seriously from the West. Besides the strategic agreement between the two countries, being the central part of the BRI and becoming a member of the SCO also gave Tehran insurance if the JCPOA talks fail and US sanctions continue.

As China is seen as a trustful partner (or even a saviour) from Tehran, Beijing could use this role to incentivise Iran to re-join the nuclear deal. But it is highly questionable whether Iran would use China's given benefits to recover its economy and normalise its international relations or continue its regional adventures and delay negotiations intended to hold back its nuclear activity stubbornly. And that makes China's deal with Iran a real risky business.



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