

CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS

Abdulkhaev Abdurashid

Researcher at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15671403>

Annotation: The article examines conceptual approaches to the study of the evolution of Sino-Iranian relations in the context of the transformation of the modern international system. Particular attention is paid to the strategic partnership between China and Iran, considered as a dynamic geopolitical flash with minimal potential for strategic consolidation. The roles of China and Iran in bilateral relations are analyzed, as well as their participation in the implementation of the global strategic initiative "One Belt - One Road". In addition, the impact of Sino-Israel cooperation on the balance of power in the Middle East region and its indirect impact on China's relations with Iran are considered.

Key words: China-Iranian relations, international system, geopolitics, strategic partnership, "One Belt - One Road" initiative, Middle East, China-Israel cooperation.

Main part. The study of the evolution of Chinese-Iranian relations constitutes a complex scientific task requiring a multilevel methodological approach to analyzing the factorial partnership in the transformation of the contemporary international system. The conceptual foundation for studying bilateral relations focuses on four key research paradigms: geopolitical realism, institutional historicism, comparative analysis of civilizational contexts, and critical analysis of systemic transformations.

The geopolitical dynamics of Chinese-Iranian relations in the contemporary international system represents a complex multi-component phenomenon that requires comprehensive scientific understanding from the position of interdisciplinary approaches. The strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Iran has formed at the intersection of sharp trends in geopolitical transformation, where traditional bipolar and unipolar models give way to new fundamental mechanisms of multilateral interaction.

China represents for Iran a model of an ideal foreign partner. China has no historically established conflicts with Iran that would affect its national pride. Unlike the United States and several European countries, the PRC adheres to a policy of non-interference in Iran's internal affairs, avoiding imposing its views on regional politics and refraining from criticism regarding human rights

compliance issues. China represents a strategic ally for Iran in opposing American hegemony, making it an important element of Tehran's foreign policy strategy.

Of particular significance in this context is China's role as a reliable and large-scale consumer of Iranian oil, as well as a source of advanced technologies, critically important goods, and investments. These aspects contribute to the modernization of Iran's economy, infrastructure, and defense capabilities. For its part, Beijing shows interest in Iran as a stable energy supplier, satisfying 7% to 11% of its oil needs in various years. Additionally, Iran represents a promising market for Chinese products and strategic territory for transporting goods to western regions.

Iran plays a key role for China in the political-strategic sphere as well. As one of the leading actors in the Middle East alongside Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, Iran provides China with unique opportunities to strengthen its influence in the region. This is particularly relevant against the backdrop of declining U.S. influence in the Middle East. For China, cooperation with Iran is part of implementing the global strategic initiative "One Belt, One Road," including projects of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." Within these initiatives, Iran occupies a central place thanks to its geopolitical position, which facilitates the development of transport and trade infrastructure necessary for regional integration and expansion of China's international presence.

Despite China's support for the nuclear deal for the aforementioned reasons, the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA has caused various consequences. Due to secondary sanctions, Iran's isolation from the world economy, and U.S. actions, there is a lack of accessible literature on this topic. The results of this research may be useful both for the post-JCPOA period in China-Iran relations and for academic, political, and economic purposes. For example, Oli Korpimäki notes the economic and social consequences of the withdrawal, while Francisco José B.S. Leandro supports these conclusions with data on the economic impact. Christopher Valerio Jovan considers this step illegal according to UN norms. Thus, the research aims to identify China's real interests and the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.

The Middle East represents particular interest for Beijing as a source of energy resources, without which further economic development of the PRC is unpromising. China seeks to ensure security and continuity of access to these resources in this region. The success of the "One Belt, One Road" project



depends on the security of strategic, vitally important maritime communications such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Suez Canal, which are controlled by Middle Eastern countries.

China, adhering to its traditional strategy of not entering any military-political coalitions or alliance relations with anyone, develops good business relations with all Middle Eastern countries—with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf states—in the name of strengthening its positions in the region. It is precisely global economic interests that determine the scale of China's involvement in the Middle East.

The strategic directions of Iran's policy, including foreign and military policy, are determined by the Supreme Leader of the IRI, Ayatollah Khamenei. Currently, it is built on a concept expressed by the Rahbar: "One of our priorities today in foreign policy is preference for the East over the West, neighbors over distant countries and peoples, and countries that share our characteristics over others." Therefore, Tehran is active precisely in deepening partnership with China, Russia, and India. This partnership is based on various foundations with the predominance of political, trade-economic, military, and military-technical components in different proportions.

Iranian-Chinese military-technical cooperation began in the 1980s. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), from 1984-1986, the PRC supplied weapons worth approximately \$1-2 billion to the IRI. In the 1990s, Chinese weapons exports to the IRI decreased somewhat, but China still transferred weapons worth \$400 million to Iran. From 1997 to 2000, sales volume increased to \$600 million. From 1982 to 2002, China earned an average of \$171 million per year from weapons exports to Iran.

This document is often called the "Iran-China Strategic Pact." The main element of the strategic pact is Chinese investment of \$400 billion in Iran's economy over 25 years in exchange for continuous supplies of Iranian oil, as well as military and military-technical cooperation that provides Beijing with significant rights in Iran and in the Persian Gulf zone. Preparation for this pact began in 2016, when PRC Chairman Xi Jinping made an official visit to Tehran.

In August 2019, IRI Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Beijing, together with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, approved a "roadmap" for comprehensive strategic partnership between the countries, discussed in 2016. It was then that unpublicized provisions on military-technical cooperation were added to the document, which include a whole range of privileges for China. For



both Iran and China, this pact became very important, not only from an economic standpoint for each side, but from political and military perspectives.

The visit of PRC Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe to Tehran in April 2020 served the practical implementation of the provisions of the Iran-China strategic pact concerning the military sphere. Despite sanctions and economic difficulties, Iran is increasing defense spending, thereby increasingly interesting China in expanding and deepening military-technical cooperation with Iran.

In 2021, China ranked fifth among the top ten leaders in global arms trade. Chinese annual arms exports bring in more than \$10 billion. In turn, in 2021, Iran ranked second in defense spending among Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa states—\$24.6 billion (after Saudi Arabia—\$55.6 billion). In one year, the IRI's military budget increased by 11% compared to the previous 2020. This allowed the IRI to move from 18th to 14th place in the list of 40 countries with the highest defense spending. The IRI also practices extra-budgetary financing of certain military expenditure items through so-called Islamic capabilities (Islamic funds, etc.) not directly controlled by the government.

Arms export-import is serious international business bringing enormous revenues to the exporter. However, in the "Persian story," not only business profit attracts Beijing to Tehran. China, step by step, unhurriedly, precisely following its historical traditions and strengthening its influence on Iranian armed forces, considers more far-reaching plans for soft control not only over Iran but over the entire Middle East.

The Iran-China strategic pact gives the green light for deploying 5,000 personnel from the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) on Iranian territory with the possibility of increasing personnel numbers to guard and ensure security of numerous facilities built with PRC assistance, and most importantly—the transit of oil, gas, and petrochemical products to China. Some of these formations will be stationed in the Persian Gulf region. This could become one of the first serious deployments of Chinese forces abroad.

Beijing, for the purpose of implementing the "One Belt, One Road" project, is carrying out a strategic offensive in the Middle East, including using Iran's capabilities. According to American political scientist Anthony Cordesman, the "One Belt, One Road" project will provide China with as many strategic advantages as open military actions, new military bases, or new arms sales cannot provide. In Cordesman's opinion, this pact gives China new enormous strategic leverage in the Persian Gulf region, through which 20% of global oil supplies pass.



Conclusion. Based on the above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

China and Iran serve as key actors in the transformation of the contemporary international system, which is conditioned by their geopolitical complementarity. Beijing uses Iran as a strategic partner in implementing the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and ensuring energy security, while Tehran, in turn, finds in China a reliable ally for opposing American hegemony and modernizing its economy. Regional stability and security are critical factors for the successful functioning of their interaction.

The development of Chinese-Iranian relations is based on pragmatism that does not presuppose interference in internal affairs or ideological restrictions. China demonstrates flexibility by cooperating with diverse Middle Eastern actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, which contributes to strengthening its economic and political positions. Iran, as a strategic transport hub, plays a central role in Chinese infrastructure projects, such as the development of transport corridors.

Chinese-Iranian military-technical cooperation demonstrates evolution from traditional arms supplies to deepened cooperation in the field of technologies and military training. The strategic pact signed in 2021 confirms the long-term intentions of both sides to deepen interaction in this sphere despite sanctions pressure and restrictions of the international system. This cooperation forms a new vector of regional security.

References:

1. Wen Sheng Chen, "China's Oil Strategy: 'Going Out' to Iran" (2010) 2:1 Asian Politics and Policy 39 at 40.
2. Lounnas Djallil, "China and the Iranian nuclear crisis: Between ambiguities and interests" (2011) 10:2 European Journal of East Asian Studies 227 at 227.
3. Olli Korpimäki, Global constraints on the imposition of economic sanctions: United States withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Master of Advanced International Studies thesis, University of Vienna, 2019) [unpublished] at 1 and 6.
4. Christopher Valerio Jovan, "The United States Unilateral Withdrawal from the Restrictions of Iran's Nuclear Program in JCPOA 2015 under International Law" (2020) 4:2 Padjadjaran Journal of International Law 247 at 247.
5. Thérèse Delpech. Iran and the Bomb: The Abdication of International Responsibility. Columbia University Press, 2007, 160 pp ISBN 978-0-231-70006-1





6. Masoud Rezaei. The Barriers to China-Iran Military Diplomacy. The Diplomat. 03.09.2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/the-barriers-to-china-iran-military-diplomacy/>
7. Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, Alexandra Marksteiner and Xiao Liang. Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2021. SIPRI Fact Sheet. April 2022. fs_2204_milex_2021_0.pdf
8. Кузмицкий С. Китай превращается в крупного экспортера оружия.

