



**THE DYNAMICS OF IRAN-CHINA “NEW” STRATEGIC
COOPERATION**

**İRAN-ÇİN “YENİ” STRATEJİK İŞBİRLİĞİNİN
DİNAMİKLERİ**

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ABSTRACT

Iran-China cooperation is not one-dimensional that based only on the economic interests of the two parties. It has other dimensions such as seeking new strategies to minimize the domination of the United States in Central Asia and the Middle East to ensure the efficient operation of their future political, economic, and strategic policies. In 2013, with the declaration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Iran-China cooperation increasingly became more critical for the two countries' political, national, and international interests. To this end, Iran and China have decided to sign a long-term (25 years) strategic cooperation agreement and Iran was admitted to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member in September 2021. Since Iran and China have common interests in political, economic, security, and military cooperation, it is predicted that the strategic and long-standing cooperation between Iran and China will be one of the most significant factors to change the balance of the Middle East and Central Asia both politically and economically. From this point of view, this study aims to explore the dynamics affecting Iran-China strategic cooperation and analyze the core factors behind this rapprochement.

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ÖZ

İran-Çin iş birliği sadece iki tarafın ekonomik çıkarlarına dayanan tek boyutlu bir iş birliği değildir. Bu iş birliğinin, ABD'nin Orta Doğu ve Orta Asya'daki hakimiyetini en aza indirmek ve İran ile Çin'in gelecekteki siyasi, ekonomik ve stratejik politikalarının verimli çalışmasını sağlamak için yeni stratejiler aramak gibi başka boyutları da vardır. 2013 yılında, Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'nin duyurulmasıyla birlikte, İran-Çin iş birliği, iki ülkenin siyasi, ulusal ve uluslararası çıkarları için giderek daha kritik hale geldi. Bu amaçla İran ve Çin, 25 yıllık bir stratejik iş birliği anlaşması imzaladılar ve İran, Eylül 2021'de Şanghay İş birliği Örgütü'nün (ŞİÖ) tam üyesi olarak kabul edildi. İran ile Çin'in siyasi, ekonomik, güvenlik ve askeri iş birliğinde ortak çıkarları bulunduğundan, İran ve Çin arasındaki stratejik ve uzun vadeli iş birliğinin, Ortadoğu ve Orta Asya'nın siyasi ve ekonomik dengelerini değiştirecek en önemli faktörlerden biri olacağı öngörülmüyor. Bu bakış açısıyla, bu çalışma İran-Çin stratejik iş birliğinin dinamiklerini keşfetmeyi ve bu iki ülke yakınlaşmasının arkasındaki temel faktörleri analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Doğu, Orta Asya, İran, Çin, Stratejik Ortaklık.

INTRODUCTION

Iran has faced many sanctions implemented by the United States (U.S.) and the United Nations (UN) since 1979 (U.S. Department of State, 2021). As Iran was perceived to be a threat to the security and interests of both the U.S. and Israel, Iran was accused of sponsoring or funding terrorism abroad, continuing nuclear enrichment, and developing nuclear weapons, the U.S. and Western countries tried to weaken Iran both economically and militarily (Global Policy Forum, 2010). In the last few years, political and economic sanctions against Iran have decreased and one of the most critical sanctions removed by the United Nations recently was Iran's arms embargo (Karimi, 2020). As a result of this development, Iran's embargo for selling and buying conventional arms that continued for 13 years has expired. Iran, therefore, aims to regain its lost political and military power. Consequently, Iran will be able to sell and buy any conventional arms,

develop its defense industry, export arms through its political orientation, and supply weapons for its defense industry (Habertürk, 2020). Since Iran's "Look East" politics during the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Administration, China-Iran relations got momentum, Pekin is considered one of the most critical political, economic, military, and security partners of Tehran. Thus, the questions raised here are: What factors might have induced the recent developing relations between Iran and China? What are the key motivations behind the new Iran-China cooperation?

In order to understand the motivations behind the recent Iran-China developing relations, it will be essential to take a glance at the historical relations between these two countries and the policies of the U.S. toward them. Iran and China have always had calm relations, their ancient relations developed under the umbrella of the Silk Road. They both are old civilizations and have essential contributions to human history. However, their modern relations only began to develop in 1971, and 2021 was the 50th anniversary of Iran-China modern relations. In recent years, Iran has become a more important actor for China in terms of achieving its economic goals, minimizing the influence of the U.S. in Central Asia and the Middle East, and filling the void left by the withdrawal of the U.S. military to Afghanistan. In addition, Iran is also important for China to ensure the stability of Central Asia and Xinjiang, and to facilitate the economic development and transportation connectivity of the BRI.

This study aims to explore the dynamics of new Iran-China relations and analyze the political, economic, security, and diplomatic benefits of the two countries from the perspective of bilateral and international interests and future political predictions. However, this study might not be able to demonstrate a whole perspective of China-Iran relations due to the challenges taken out with the advent of the Russian-Ukraine war. This study tries to explore the variants of the Iran-China rapprochement from the perspective of regional and international political power balances and interests. Then it proceeds with analyzing the risk factors of this strategic cooperation. Finally, it tries to make some predictions for the two countries' approaches to the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries in the context of their foreseen policies.

1. A GLANCE AT THE THEORY AND LITERATURE

Theoretically, "New" Sino-Iranian relations can be categorized as Great Power-Middle Power relations with an asymmetrical position in power and capabilities. Existing similar examples of these relations are US-South Korea, US-Australia, and China-Vietnam. China-Iran relations (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). China-Iran relations are developing in line with their political, military, and economic interests. Considering China's current political stance in

the international arena, China is considered both as an emerging and a great power that will enable it to advance in its goals of becoming a superpower. One of the most appropriate definitions of great power for China's current position has been given by Mearsheimer:

“Great powers are determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability. To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world.” (Mearsheimer, 2001).

While China is more suitable to be considered as a great power, Iran can be contemplated as a middle power with its large population, economy, and conventional army that has a noteworthy influence on the region and the entire Middle East (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). In this context, Dong's definition of middle power is one of the most appropriate definitions to show Iran's international standing:

“A state actor that has restricted influence on deciding the distribution of power in a given regional system, but is capable of deploying a variety of sources of power to change the position of great powers and to defend its own position on matters related to the security affairs of the region to which it belongs.” (Dong-min Shi, 2012).

China's struggles to develop advanced relations with the countries in the Middle East in response to the U.S. presence and dominance in East Asia is a balancing strategy (Hulden and Zaamout, 2019). Accordingly, Iran is a critical international actor in the political, military, and economic cooperation of China toward the Middle East, West and Central Asia.

As a reaction to the presence and domination of the US in East Asia, China endeavors to develop advanced relations with the Middle Eastern countries in the context of a balancing strategy (Houliden and Zaamout, 2019). Therefore, Iran has the potential to increase China's influence in the Middle East not only in economic aspects but also in political and military aspects.

There are many types of relations and cooperation established to increase the power and influence of international actors and enable them to have a key role in balancing power in the global system (Walt, 1987). The middle powers can act significantly for the great powers in the context of their active position in enhancing the security of the great powers. The middle powers also play an attractive role for the great powers to cooperate. Accordingly, the developing relations between China and Iran will probably give them a great advantage vis-a-vis great and superpowers (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). If foreign policy is a strategy of actions for international actors to achieve their political goals and get

the maximum national and international interests of their country, then, what we expect and try to find out in China-Iran relations are the motivations and the prompts behind this relation. Scita argues that China-Iran's recent relations are developing parallel to China's ambition of being recognized as a great power. (Scita, 2022). Yellinek thinks a bit differently by arguing that while China was seeing Iran as an important partner, China is still a bit reluctant to increase its influence in Iran on a large scale, as China desired to protect itself from the negative development of Iran's international affairs (Yellinek, 2020). However, in the last few years, Iran-China relations become an essential agenda in the international arena. Garver claims that due to the intensified nuclear program of Iran started in the early 2000s, China was not able to take the initiative to support Iran directly, since China should consider its relations with the U.S. and other Western countries (Garver, 2013). What Kuo argues is China desires to be a dominant technological power to challenge the leadership of the U.S. in the international arena in the context of soft power and a better political and social model (Kuo, 2022).

Some researchers claim that China needs to consider its dependency on energy and the role of Iran taken in the Middle East and the BRI. Some Chinese politicians think that China should give more importance to its relations with Iran and that Iran is a crucial country for the interests of China (Harold and Nader, 2012). In fact, this point of view consists of one of the most important components of China-Iran cooperation. While Iran's expectations are more inclined toward political ideologies. China tries to follow balanced diplomacy between Tehran and Washington by exerting pressure on Iran to handle negotiations with international actors from time to time (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). With the help of changes in the geopolitical power balances, China has had some new political strategies and tried to follow a supportive policy for Iran. In this context, Iran is thought to be more hopeful with China's stance in the UN Security Council against the possible new sanctions of the U.S. and the UN. By means of this strategy, Iran hopes to use the power of China and Russia in the United Nations as leverage against Western sanctions and pressures (Garver, 2013; Fathi, 2021).

According to Garver, although sometimes China has also shown a negative approach against Iran's nuclear weapons, Iran and China are sharing many common interests as well (Garver, 2013). China aims to strengthen its relations with Iran, as China attributes a crucial role to Iran to balance the Middle East politically (Liu and Wu, 2010). China has no alliances or politically close countries in the Middle East. Since China will not be content with loose relations with the countries in the Middle East where the U.S. has many alliances and political and militaristic strategic partners. Respectively, China has committed to give Iran \$400 billion for the next 25 years. This agreement could deepen China's ties with the Middle East and Central Asian countries. It is estimated that this cooperation will

also help Iran to be less exposed to America's isolation (Fassihi and Lee, 2021). Iran's position in global energy may also help China be less reliant on the other energy exporter in the Middle East that are considered an alliance with the U.S. (İzadi and Khodaei, 2017).

There are many studies conducted on the growing relations between Iran and China. However, China's present politics are different from China's former "Low Profile" policies continued from the opening-up and reform policies period to President Xi period. Recently, China tried to calculate every political step that paced against China. Thus, I argue that Iran and China aim to use their recent political, economic, and military proximity as an opposite step to the policies of the U.S. That's to say, the proximity of Iran and China is a critical move of Iran against Israel and a critical move of China against the conducted policies of the U.S. against China in South Asia and the Pacific. To reach its political objectives, Iran tends to enhance its multilateral relations with China. This strategic rapprochement is an opportunity for China as well. China's this political strategy means, the more the U.S. surrounds China and establishes advanced alliance relations with Chinese peripheries, the more China will be encouraged to increase its presence in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia as leverage to the dominance of the U.S. China has changed its political rhetoric after China has experienced the antagonistic approach of the U.S. to the interests of China in East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Therefore, recently these two countries are in the process of building high-level bilateral cooperation. This cooperation is expected to play a critical role in the future of the Middle East and Central Asia as well. Particularly, after the U.S. decided to remove its troops from Afghanistan and it has relatively lost its credibility in the Middle East. To this end, China aims to fortify its position and increase its political and economic presence in Central Asia and the Middle East. What about China's intensive collaboration with the Gulf, particularly with the UAE and Saudi Arabia? These two are also trying and largely succeeding in balancing Iran.

2. DYNAMICS OF IRAN-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT

Iran-China peaceful relations go back to the two countries' ancient Silk Road era relations. With the success of the Islamic Revolution in the period 1978-1979, Iran shifted its pro-West policy to a new one which was majorly developed with the maxim of "Neither East Nor West". Concurrently, Chinese foreign policy was also experiencing post-Mao reforms and Opening-Up strategies (Sahriatinia, 2011). A few years later, China-Iran relations entered a new and quick-developing era. Between 1985 and 2015, Iran and China had many ministerial and heads of state reciprocity visits. During this period, almost every Iranian president visited China with the purpose of an official capacity including Ali Khamenei, Akbar Hashemi, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani

(Houlden and Zaamout, 2019). Respectively, China has foreseen that China's this strategic policy will have a significant impact on China's developing relations with Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries parallel to its BRI and its emerging global power objectives. Considering these developments, China tried to take advantage of the quick-changing political and economic situation of the states and regions to increase its presence in the Middle East where the prestige of the U.S. is declining. As current relations between regional and global powers are much more complicated than before, China may have aimed to balance the political and strategic power of global powers (most notably the U.S.) by increasing its influence and presence in middle eastern countries (Yildirimcakar and Han, 2022). As a result of these intended policies carried out by China, the proximity of China and Iran took some critics from Western countries.

With the sign of the JCPOA, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Iran to deepen China-Iran relations to demonstrate Iran's political importance and boost its relations with it. President Xi was the first leader who visited Iran aftermath of the signing of the JCPOA. Later, China and Iran established a new version of the partnership called 'The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (Forough, 2021). Iran Ambassador to China Mohammad Keshavarzadeh stated that the critics and blames of Western countries for Iran-China relations are not constructive. China and Iran established friendly and peaceful relations throughout history and now they are building new political and economic cooperation. The two countries' defense, military relations, and cooperation in reviving the ancient Silk Road are in the process (Wenting, 2021). In this regard, it can be foreseen that Iran-China relations will not be limited to simple oil-trade cooperation in the future. Despite the critics and dissatisfaction of the Western world, China-Iran cooperation will continue to develop, and it seems that the Western power will not be able to stop the development of these states of affairs. In this process, Iran has also been inclined to develop its relations with China both politically and economically. As President Rouhani has strongly mentioned, Iran wanted to be an actor in the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) (Abbas, 2016). Since Iran has a critical position in the Silk Road Economic Belt and energy supplement of China.

Iran-China agreed to establish long-term cooperation on March 27, 2021, as a sign of multilateral development relations between the two countries. After the signing of this agreement, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang stated that "the Relations between the two countries have now reached the level of strategic partnership and China seeks to improve relations with Iran comprehensively, and our relations with Iran will not be affected by the current situation but will be permanent and strategic" (Reuters, 2021). Iran-China intimate relations will likely help China put forward more political and economic projects to improve the infrastructure of the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. This cooperation will also make the U.S. and Israel more concerned about the future

of nuclear arms in Iran and the security of the Middle East. As it is known, from the last few years on, the international policies that China followed have sheltered Iran by hampering the U.S. and other international players to press Iran for its nuclear program. Since China not only considers that Iran is a crucial partner can be used as leverage against the U.S. but also considers that Iran has a noteworthy role in the future of Central Asia, it has large gas, oil, and other natural reserves that make it play a major role in the economic development and energy requirement projects of China.

On the other hand, China aims to take Iran's support to solve Afghanistan's instability issues. Since Afghanistan is a critical country for China's BRI and the security of Xinjiang, with the support of Iran, China aims to solve the instability of the Afghanistan issue and take critical precautions for the security of Xinjiang. China's former ambassador Yao Jing stated that "Without Afghan connectivity, there is no way to connect China with the rest of the world" (Eguegu and Aatif, 2021). This is expected to help China realign its policies toward the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. China can take advantage of this situation and enable Iran and Pakistan to support China to increase its influence on Central Asia and the Middle East.

In the process of nuclear negotiations, China had a crucial and constructive role and nearly took the all-participant countries' appreciation with its 'constructive role' (Azad, 2017) However, the U.S. has stated that the sanctions against Iran will not stop until Iran promised that Iran will stop nuclear enrichment. However, Iran's response was "We set the conditions and it will not be withdrawn" (Hurriyet, 2021). After Iran's this response, the reactions of the U.S. and other preeminent actors were anxiously awaited. After Ebrahim Raisi came to power and Iran got closer to Russia and China both politically and economically, Iranian media announced this progress was a victory against the U.S. (Fathi, 2021). Respectively China became the major oil importer and the number one trade partner of Iran. With this result, Iranian media described Iran's this step as a possible member of the SCO.

Iran and China both are dissatisfied with the policies of the U.S. and some other Western nations. In this direction, Iran and China tried to enhance their ties and sign a 25-years strategic partnership. However, both Iran and China did not want to give specific details of this strategic cooperation and China was seen to be more willing to conceal the details of the 25-year strategic cooperation. Since this could be a political strategy for China to weaken the dominance of the U.S. both in Central Asia and the Middle East (Green and Roth, 2021). Though China has different levels of partnership with different states. However, Iran has taken one of the highest levels of this partnership. Table 1 shows the details of the levels of China's strategic partnerships.

Table.1: Levels of Chinese Partnerships (South China Morning Post, 2016)

Friendly Cooperative Partnership:	Strengthening bilateral cooperation in terms of trade and investment.
Cooperative Partnership:	Strengthening bilateral support based on shared benefits and shared respect
Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership:	Maintaining the solid impetus of high-end exchanges, developing links at numerous levels, and increasing mutual understanding for mutual benefit.
Strategic Partnership:	Upgraded strategic level, coordinated on regional and international issues, compromising Strategic and military partnerships to improve relations with major powers.
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	A multidimensional, comprehensive, and multi-layered collaboration. It includes both bilateral and multilateral levels in terms of economic, scientific, technological, political, and cultural fields.

With the 25-year strategic agreement, China planned to give Iran an amount between \$400 to \$800 billion to support the Iranian economy in the coming three decades. Some scholars of Western countries describe this new cooperation as “the new Axis of Evil” and it will also bring instability to the region (Figueroa, 2021). However, China has established crucial interactions both with the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries and China is considered a locomotive for the economic development of many countries in these regions. On the other hand, this agreement is expected to strengthen Iran's economy, trade, and investments in Central and West Asia and the Middle East. In this context, China will probably not only need Iran for its increasing energy requirement in the future but also China aims to be more active in the Middle East to decrease the dominance of the U.S. make its BRI project work smoothly and connect different countries to China within its limitation of not interfering with other countries' domestic issues.

The advanced cooperation negotiations between Iran and China back to 2016 when President Xi visited Iran. From that time on, China has taken an important position in Iran's nuclear issue with its permanent member position in the United Nations. China has also criticized the U.S. for not fulfilling the United Nations Security Council's resolutions for Iran's nuclear deal (JCPOA) (Wenting, 2021). As can be seen more clearly, China's stance on Iran's position has changed remarkably. China could use this card to help Iran and increase its influence on the Iranian Government. Consequently, if Iran expects this support from China, Iran will surely consider having deeper political, economic, militaristic, and strategic relations with China. If China and Iran have good cooperation, it may change the power balance in favor of China and diminish the focus of the U.S. on East and South Asia where China has essential interests. (Garver, 2011).

On the other hand, not only the U.S. but also Israel is worried about the developing interactions between Iran and China. Since a powerful Iran in the

context of political, economic, and military aspects will be considered a threat to the existence of Israel. What Israel is most worried about is China may help Iran develop its militaristic technology or help Iran increase its militaristic capabilities. Along with China’s assistance to Iran against the sanctions of the United Nations and the U.S., China assisted Iran to develop its nuclear program until 1997. However, China stopped assisting Iran when China figured out that the U.S. may use this cause to assist Taiwan. After President Xi Jinping came to power, China-Iran relations had big progress. China’s help was both on the state level and private company levels. The draft of the agreement that China and Iran signed on March 27th, 2021, was partially leaked by Iran in July 2020. The agreement was including progress in military, technological, and intelligence cooperation. On the other hand, Iran is not the only critical partner of China, which has a critical position in the Middle East, but also The UAE and Saudi Arabia are also very important for China, however, a bit different from these countries, a comparison between investments in the GCC countries and Iran shows a different picture. Iran is politically playing a more important role in Chinese politics (Orion, 2021). China also sees Iran as an important country in the Middle East that can help China to make the U.S. lose prestige and lose its power and influence in the region. Similarly, Iran sees China as one of the rising powers that can help Iran against the sanctions of the U.S., UN, EU, and other Western powers. Therefore, for China, Iran may be more influential than Russia.

Table.2: China’s Strategic Partnership List (Fulton, 2019)

Country	Level of Partnership	Year Signed
Turkey	Strategic Partnership	2010
Algeria	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
United Arab Emirates	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018

The new 25-year partnership between Iran and China has the potential to bring a high-level military partnership between China and Iran. If it brings such a partnership, Chinese influence will be increased in the Middle East, and China will probably benefit from buying discounted oil provided by Iran (Fassihi and Lee, 2021). As China’s investment and trade web is expanding day by day in the Middle

East and Africa, China will probably need to show a military presence in the Middle East just as China did in Djibouti a few years ago, or China will need to protect its interests with the help of the states that China have started strategic partnerships with.

3. IRAN-CHINA MILITARY COOPERATION

After the fall of the Soviet Union, China started to be concerned about the global peace generated by the unbalanced international system. At that time, China, and Iran both were not satisfied with the unipolarity, and they were sharing a common idea of establishing a multi-polar international system by early 1990. (Zhao, 2014). By then, they did not have enough trust to establish an alignment or reach a consensus to declare their political and economic policies. However, a few years later, China became Iran's most important political, commercial, and military partner. When the China- U.S. competition geared up, when Iran faced many political and economic sanctions generated by the U.S. China saw Iran as a crucial player in the intersection of Central Asia, Caucasus, and the Middle East. At that time, Iran expressed its desire for having a reliable position in the SCO (Scita, 2019). In fact, establishing strategic relations with Iran was a required strategy for China, as China needed it as leverage against the encirclement of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia against China (Green and Roth, 2019). Even though China was not able to establish an encirclement policy against the U.S., however, China could influence the politics of the U.S. in the Middle East and Central Asia by enhancing its relations with regional states. The cooperation established among China, Iran, Russia, and Pakistan had the potential to encourage the SCO to have a regional cooperative position. For this reason, the chief diplomats of the SCO were seen as leverage for the "Quad" which is a strategic dialogue established between the U.S., Japan, Australia and, India in 2007 (Eguegu and Aatif, 2021).

Another reason that brings China closer to Iran is to balance the power majorly driven in the Middle East by the U.S. As it can clearly be understood, President Xi tries to shift China's "*tao guang yang hui*" policy which means "keep a low profile" to a more self-confident one in its global affairs (Wang, 2016). As it can also be observed, the rivalry between China and the U.S. is increasing in South Asia and the Middle East. This rivalry is also increasing in the framework of acquiring more reliable partners. According to Axios Reports in December 2020, The United States has accused China of providing economic assistance to nonstate actors in Afghanistan (Green and Roth, 2021). In this context, China attributes a leverage role to Iran in the Middle East and Central Asia against the increasing presence of the United States in South Asia. Since China is always accusing the U.S. of supporting the independence of Taiwan as well as intervening in the internal issues of China (namely the Xinjiang issue). In this point of view, Iran

backs China having a more stable role in the defense security and economy of Central Asia and the Middle East. Thus, China and Iran's cooperation can progress in the context of confronting the hegemony and hostility of the U.S.

With the termination of the international sanctions on Iran, the states that have the potential to provide arms to Iran have also started to be debated. Iran can unsurprisingly buy weapons as other countries do. However, one of the critical questions raised here is from which country Iran can supply its new weapons, and which country is expected to enhance its political, military, and economic relations with Iran. With the end of embargos on its arms supply, Iran will most likely purchase arms from Russia and China. The U.S. has claimed that with the expiration of the Iran arms embargo, Iran will probably purchase several Su-30 fighter jets, Yak-130 trainer aircraft, T-90 tanks, S-400 anti-aircraft missiles, and defense systems from Russia (Karimi, 2020). China seems to have more chances to provide arms to Iran. However, currently, China is not willing to be a critical arm provider to the Middle Eastern and Central Asian States. Though China is pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy than before. However, China is still not willing to be the first one to increase tensions with the U.S. and Western countries. Due to the increasing militaristic existence of the U.S. in South Asia and the Pacific, Iran-China strategic partnership may also have a military dimension, and it may create a market for Chinese military equipment and solve Iran's lack of defense and other military equipment.

In fact, in the past years, China has already helped Iran to modernize its military capabilities and to develop its nuclear programs. China has also provided Iran with know-how and technology and developed its capacities in energy sources by building bridges, tunnels, and railroads (Harold and Nader, 2012, p. 22). Another example is in the period 1979 to 1990, China has also given Iran important tanks and weapons (Hyer, 1992; Hinkey, 1990). China has held some military exercises both with Iran and Saudi Arabia. In 2016, after Iran's international sanctions were lifted, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Iran, meanwhile, Iran and China signed 17 economic accords by putting an economic objective to make the bilateral economic volume reach \$600 billion by 2026 (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). Iran and China have decided increasingly to use their national currencies to handle their economic, energy, and other commercial activities (BBC, 2021). Because China aims to make the Chinese Yuan (RMB) one of the main foreign currencies for purchasing oil, energy, and other commercial transactions.

China has not pursued a colonial idea in its long history. Currently, China is also preserving this ideology in its foreign policy. In addition, unlike the U.S., China does not have any military existence in the Persian Gulf or the Middle East. Currently, China does not have allies in the Middle East as well, it only tries to

establish partners to benefit from "win-win" cooperation. It is not responsible for the safety of marine and oil supplies in that region. Therefore, China will not be considered a threat to the Iranian nuclear enrichment program as well. China does not concern about Iran's nuclear program, even though China secretly assisted Iran to establish a nuclear research center in 1985. Even after the 90s, China provided Iran with a large amount of uranium (Currier and Dorraj, 2010). In recent years, China aimed to increase its technological investment in Iran as well. However, some Chinese telecommunication companies such as Huawei and ZTE are depended on American technologic companies for providing some critical technical parts. Therefore, there is a risk for China, as some companies in the U.S. can limit the accession of Chinese companies to the technical support of the companies of the U.S. in the context of Iran sanctions (Freifield and Auchard, 2018). Thus, China has started to give more importance to achieving a more independent technologic level to fulfill its strategic policies all around the world.

The leaving of the U.S. from Afghanistan is another factor for China-Iran cooperation. As the turmoil that the U.S. left behind in Afghanistan created instability risks both for Chinese and Iranian interests. To this end, it is thought that Sino-Iranian cooperation can also put an end to the disagreements in Afghanistan. By cooperating with Pakistan to resolute the political issues of Afghanistan and create applicability for CPEC and other components of the BRI. In this context, they aim to stabilize Afghanistan and Central Asia.

4. IRAN'S SCO MEMBERSHIP

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China was concerned about the future of Xinjiang and collected newly liberated states of Central Asia to negotiate the settlement of territorial disputes to establish a stable environment and consolidate the borders of China and Central Asian countries (Yildirimcakar, 2019). China aimed to draw the focus of the regional countries to accept the rising influence of China in the region and the world (Garlick and Havlova, 2020). Since China wanted to realize these targets with the establishment of the SCO. Respectively, the SCO was established, and priority was given to security cooperation and demilitarizing of the borders of the member states. It was clearly professed in the initial article of the 2001 SCO Convention that the SCO was established to fight against the "Three Evils" (Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism) (Allison, 2018). Afterward, this "Three Evils" policy was pursued by the Chinese Government, even though it became a milestone of China's domestic and foreign policy.

A few years after the establishment of the SCO, Iran got observer status in the SCO. Almost three years after getting observer status, Iran applied for full membership of the SCO. Iran's SCO status was upgraded from observer status to

full member country status with the SCO summit held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2021 (Xinhua, 2021). Iran's effort to get full membership of the SCO was approved nearly 15 years later. In 2023, after some political and legal procedures, Iran will be a formal member of SCO (Aljazeera, 2021).

Iran got an important diplomatic achievement when it got full membership of the SCO at its 21st summit in Dushanbe. With the attainment of Pakistan, India, and Iran, the SCO has turned out to be the world's leading regional organization, with almost half of the world's population and 20 percent of the global GDP (Zabel, 2021). The SCO is considered to bring significant benefits to Iran. With its geopolitical position, Iran can also take a strategic mission in the SCO, with the withdrawal of the military forces of the U.S. from Afghanistan, Iran may be able to integrate Afghanistan into the SCO or help Afghanistan cooperate with China and Pakistan. Thus, Iran can take a noteworthy role in the political, defense, security, and economic aspects of the SCO. With the sanctions lifted, Iran has tried to establish closer relations with China and Russia. Iran's SCO membership can provide a counterweight to the Western world and Iran believes that its SCO membership will bring many opportunities to Iran, even if it may open new political and economic doors to Iran (Zabel, 2021). Even if Iran is not able to create new opportunities for the SCO, however, at least, it can decrease the risks of China based on security and economic concerns.

In fact, with the removing sanctions of the United Nations over Iran in 2015 with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran's SCO membership began to come to the fore. Though China was not very positive to accept Iran to the SCO, However, Iran was deeply interested in the participation of this organization, and Iran was able to successfully convince China to get its support for Iran's SCO membership process (Grajewski, 2021). Though Iran will not be able to affect the decision-making process of the SCO directly. However, Iran will be able to increase the prestige of the organization and make the decision-making process hold the security and economic decisions more deliberately. Iran's obtaining membership in the SCO was also positively affected by Iran-China comprehensive strategic cooperation agreement signed between the two parties in March 2021 (Eguegu and Aatif, 2021).

5. THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE IRAN-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Iran-China relations are also progressing parallel to China's Middle East policies. (Sabir and Latif, 2020). Iran is one of the few countries that is not a strategic partner or alliance of the U.S. in the Middle East. When exploring Iran and China's close and long-term partnership, possible risks and disadvantages should also be analyzed for both sides. It seems that these close relations will not

bring critical risks for Iran. However, for China, the situation is not the same. In this regard, one of the most important factors is how China's other strategic partners that have relatively bad relations with Iran will react to this long-term strategic cooperation. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is one of the most critical partners of China and it does not have good relations with Iran. Thus, in the long run, will Saudi Arabia welcome China-Iran rapprochements? In this context, China will likely have to pursue a balancing strategy between China-Iran and China-Saudi Arabia relations.

Some Iranians are not satisfied with the developing relations between China and Iran. They are concerned that a long-time deal with China will probably make Iran heavily dependent on China and China will take advantage of Iran to achieve its long-term objectives (Forough, 2021). Along with this approach, Iran's 'Look East' policy worries China immensely due to its uncertainty about whether this is a new strategy or a part of its political expediency. In recent years, China has been concerned about some of Iran's actions. Although there are not enough positive thinkers toward China in Iran, China needs to give more importance to deepening its relations with Iran. Iran's "Look East" policy does not seem like a long-standing strategy, it could be a beneficial measure to cope with Western sanctions. However, China and Iran need each other, they need to increase reciprocal trust in terms of political and strategic policies (Fan, 2022).

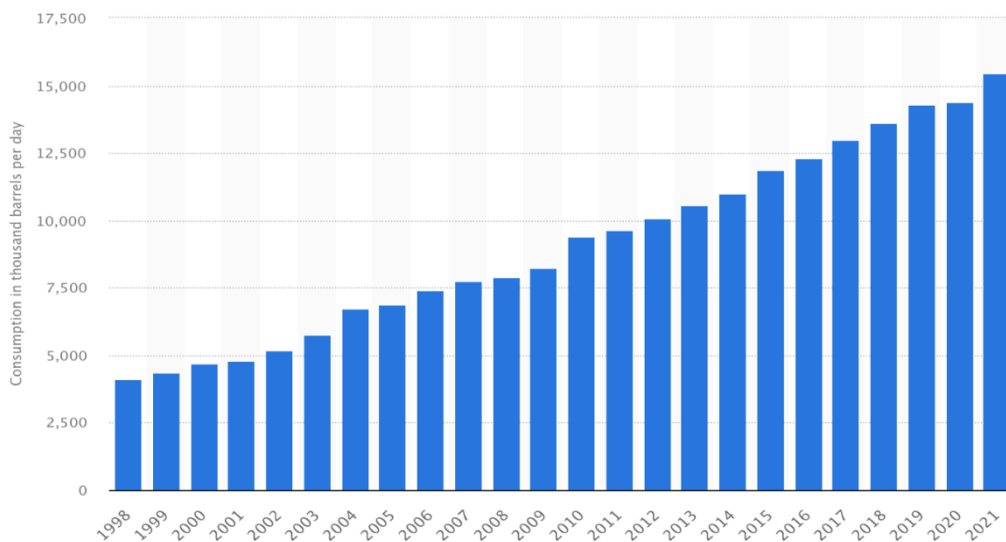
Not only some Islamic organizations in Iran but also Wahhabi groups and Afghanistan's unstable position are creating important concerns for China in the context of China's worries for the Xinjiang region and the Chinese Muslim population (Garver, 2006). Iran's not willing to complete its full action plan in FATF may also create problems in China-Iran relations (FATF, 2023). Another important factor is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE's reaction to this cooperation is also quite important. As it is known, the UAE is China's gate to open to the Middle East and Africa. The UAE is taking a logistic center position for Chinese products, and it will probably play a more noteworthy role for China with the establishment of the BRI. From this perspective, Iran and China's advanced relations may create unrest in China-UAE relations as well. Thus, when China is enhancing its relations with Iran, it should also be more cautious about its relations with the other Middle Eastern countries.

China and Iran are in the process of building one of the highest strategic partnerships. Iran is expected to be a major country in China's BRI development process. In this context, Iran is attaching great importance to its relations with China. Hence, China is going to be the first country to build such an advanced level of relations with Iran so far (Xue and Zheng, 2016). If China lost the UAE and Saudi Arabia for the sake of its relations with Iran, China would probably face deep difficulties in the aspects of economy and energy, since Iran does not have

the potential to solve the energy requirement issues of China alone. Moreover, Iran will not be able to play a more central role in the transportation of Chinese goods than the UAE plays. In this regard, when China is deepening its bilateral relations with Iran, it should also consider, the reactions of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In the long run, Iran will not be able to sufficiently satisfy China’s energy, trade, security, and investment policies alone.

Iran has significant geo-economic advantages for China. It is possessing a crucial railway network for China’s BRI by connecting it to China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWEAC). Iran is a middle power, and it is a crucial partner for China, in China's progress on the road to superpower (Belal, 2020). Although oil seems like an influential element in Iran-China relations. However, one of the chief factors is China’s ambition to increase its presence in the Middle East and balance the influence of the U.S. To this end, the view of Iran and China for the future is another important factor that should be examined. Rashid considers that Iran and China have different strategies against the Western world. China for instance sees the West as an area to reach its political, economic, and strategic objectives. However, Iran’s approach to the West is totally based on its political ideologies (Rashid, 2021). Though Iran and China have different expectations for their relations with the West, they have similar expectations for the future of Central Asia and the Middle East. China, for instance, wants to be sure about the security of Xinjiang and establish stability in Central Asia. Iran and China both want to make the U.S. and other Western powers leave Afghanistan. They both want to make Afghanistan stable for the security of Central Asia and economic projects among China, Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

Graphic.1: Energy Oil Consumption in China from 1998 to 2021 (Aizarani, 2023)



As can be seen in Graphic 1, one of the important factors in China-Iran relations is the energy requirement of China. As it is known, China's oil requirement is increasing day by day, and China needs to provide more oil and other energy supplies at a relatively cheaper price. Thus, China-Iran 25-year agreement has a significant meaning for China's energy requirement. Due to its dependency on oil, China was among the few countries that have been granted the exception of the U.S. sanctions on Iran (Raza, 2019). Thus, China-Iran energy relations did not affect deeply. Afterward, China provided energy support to expand Iran's oil fields with the help of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinopec. China's this support has been regarded as one of the greatest opportunities for Iran in the context of foreign investment in Iran's energy sector in the post-JCPOA era.

Iran's largest trade partner is China and China has a crucial role in the UN to protect Iran against the UN and the US sanction. In this regard, China signed a long-lasting critical "strategic cooperation pact" with Iran during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang's visit to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, the UAE, Bahrain, and Oman for the purpose of fulfilling safety and stability in the region in the context of establishing mutual respect, equity, justice, setting collective security, as well as accelerating development cooperation. Chinese part has also stated that "China will continue to play a constructive role in bringing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action back on track". Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu said that "new changes in the Iranian nuclear situation, all parties need to increase the sense of urgency" (Krishnan, 2021).

China is demanding to increase its influence in the Middle East, with its geopolitical position and trade potential in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. Iran is one of the most important countries that China can cooperate with both economically and politically. China provides Iran with economic and energy opportunities, as well as tries to make Iran relaxed against international isolation in the future. China sees, Iran, and Central Asia as more than economic and trade partners, they are much more important to China in the security aspects. Thus, Iran and China established military cooperation and signed an agreement to combat terrorism jointly in 2014 (Vatanka, 2021). However, there is still a probability that China may not be willing to entangle itself with Iran's every political and economic policy, as China will not make itself be seen as if it is trying to intervene in all international issues as the U.S. does. Moreover, China-Iran cooperation seems will also make China have an important position in the rebuilding of Syria. As a supporter of a stable Middle East through its economic interests and energy requirements, China's existence in the region may be welcomed by the people of the region in which the U.S. is stuck and increasingly not wanted. Accordingly, Iran and China will try hard to make the U.S. lose its prestige and its allies in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Iran wants to be a sea transportation hub for Chinese goods, and it aims to use its Chabahar port as a crucial element of the BRI. However, China has invested in Pakistan's Gwadar port in recent years, which creates several uncertainties for Iran (Vatanka, 2021). Despite these minor accounts, China-Iran relations are developing within the framework of five focuses of China's BRI such as policy coordination, unimpeded trade, financial integration, facilitation of connectivity, and people-to-people bonds. China designed the BRI to simplify the integration process of countries willing to cooperate with China. In this regard, the BRI has both strategic and geopolitical values for Chinese foreign policy (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2017: 48). As with the inauguration of the BRI in 2013, China aimed to get as much support as possible from countries that have the potential to support the BRI and cooperate with China. China's this strategy has progressed smoothly in the context of achieving the highest level of consensus among the countries that China wished to include in the BRI (Ye, 2015: 206).

Another important point is Iran's position in China's political and economic stance in the Middle East. Iran has taken the second position among China's all trade partners in the Middle East. In 2015, the volume of trade between China and Iran was close to 500 billion dollars and China has become the major oil purchaser for Iran and the largest market for Iran's non-oil trade products. Iran has a vital position in China's new Silk Road project namely the BRI. As these two countries did not have any remarkable hostile interactions, China is not seeing Iran as a threat to China's emerging power status and its interests in Central Asia and the Middle East. Therefore, China-Iran relations are relatively at an initial stage (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2017). It can be predicted that the cooperation between the two countries will be intensified and go ahead. Thus, the present and future partnership and cooperation of these two countries are also an outcome of the two countries' cooperation for the last 20 years.

6. CONCLUSION

Since 2010 China has established strategic cooperation with several Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. With the establishment of the BRI and AIIB Bank, the cooperation between China and Middle Eastern states has been geared up. With this strategic cooperation, China is not only aiming to create a wider area for Chinese products and investments but also China aims to limit the dominance of the U.S. and integrate the regional countries into China in the context of the BRI and the AIIB Bank in terms of the new win-win strategies. To decrease the effect of the U.S. in Central Asia and the Middle East, China aims to integrate some targeted countries into China. This tactic is considered to be a leverage to the increasing existence of the U.S. in South Asia and the Pacific. Among these targeted countries, Iran is one of the most critical ones. Thus, China-Iran and

China-Russia cooperation is expected to give China a new opportunity to be the next leading country in Central Asia and the Middle East.

With a simple expression, the more the U.S. conducts aggressive policies against Iran and China, the easier China will get opportunities to deepen its relations with the countries against the US hegemony. Iran will probably be one of the most important countries with its geopolitical position between the Middle East and Central Asian countries. China has established tremendous strategic cooperation with Iran not only for Iran's potential in supplying energy resources but also for Iran's significance in solving the Afghanistan issue and Iran's role in Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly, in Syria and Iraq. China signed a 25-year of strategic cooperation with Iran and supported Iran to take a full member position in the SCO. In this context, China may be willing to show a military existence in the Middle East as well as China did in Africa (Djibouti). If China shows such a presence, Iran will have a critical position in the Chinese military presence. Though China is pursuing a non-intervention policy which means not intervening in other countries' domestic affairs. However, China will probably (within its non-intervention policies and principles) need to show a military presence in other regions as retaliation to the military existence of the U.S. in the surroundings of China. China and Iran can cooperate closely, and Russia may also join such cooperation. China, Iran, and Russia have a common political ambition to reduce the hegemony and sovereignty of the U.S. in the world. Therefore, Iran seems will remain China's top partner not only for its role in energy supplement and BRI connectivity but also because China-Iran cooperation will be considered a big challenge to the political, military, and economic interests of the U.S. in the Middle East and Central Asia. However, in the shadow of the Russian-Ukraine war China-Iran, China-Russia, and Russia-Iran relations need to be studied more deeply.

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