

Iranian Elite's Perception of China

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Abstract

The present study was conducted with the aim of analyzing Iranian elites' attitudes toward China's role in Iran and the world, and of presenting policy recommendations based on field findings. The theoretical framework of the study is a combination of the constructivist approach, which emphasizes the social construction of political realities, and approaches that focus on the influence of public opinion and elites in the process of foreign policy formulation. Using a survey research method and a researcher-developed questionnaire, the attitudes of 250 Iranian academic, economic, and media elites were measured across four variables—performance, trust, importance, and opportunity—within three domains: economic, cultural–social, and political–security. The findings indicate a multidimensional attitude grounded in strategic realism. In the economic domain, elites acknowledge China's privileged position as a key actor in the global economy and consider the expansion of trade relations an opportunity for Iran. At the same time, they emphasize the necessity of market diversification, avoiding exclusivity, differentiating China's role in the energy sector, and technology transfer instead of mere dependence. The level of trust in this domain has been assessed as relatively low due to concerns about product quality and uncertainty regarding long-term commitments. In the cultural–social domain, elites largely view China as an opportunity for developing tourism, academic exchanges, and cultural interactions; however, they consider Iranian society's knowledge of China's cultural and social dimensions to be limited and emphasize the need to develop deep, bilateral interactions free from directive oversight. In the political–security domain, although China's international role and its importance for Iran are acknowledged, the level of trust is low due to Beijing's ambiguous and interest-driven behavioral record in international organizations and the Middle East region. Elites emphasize Iran's regional strategic autonomy, leveraging China's support in international institutions, and avoiding the foundation of foreign policy on the axis of China–U.S. competition. In conclusion, by placing the concept of "national interest" as the link between elites' attitudes and policymakers, the paper highlights the necessity of formulating an active, smart, and national-interest-based strategy toward China. This strategy should, while benefiting from opportunities for cooperation, focus on preserving strategic autonomy, diversifying foreign relations, and increasing Iran's bargaining power.

Keywords: Iranian elites, performance, trust, importance, opportunity, national interest.

Introduction

In today's global landscape, foreign policy formulation should give serious attention to citizens' roles and public opinion. Domestically, this can help foster citizens' trust in government; internationally, public backing can substantially increase the effectiveness of policies. Moreover, the social and intersubjective character of international relations makes foreign policy-making a dynamic process. In other words, as international actors' performances, practices, and actions unfold, citizens' perceptions of those actors may shift accordingly. Therefore, foreign policy decision-makers should remain in sustained engagement with public opinion, particularly with elites. In fact, public concerns and interests have become a key element of contemporary governance. Accordingly, policy formulation should be grounded in consultation with society. On the other hand, the binary separation of domestic policy and foreign policy into two discrete spheres has become increasingly difficult to sustain in today's world. As policymaking has shifted from vertical decision-making toward more horizontal forms that are attentive to domestic variables—and as domestic and international politics have become intertwined—it is clear that these two arenas influence one another in fluid and reciprocal ways.

In the current risk-laden yet opportunity-oriented transitional world, it is essential for Iran's foreign policy makers to understand those actors who can reshape the international order and transform the field of international politics, particularly given Iran's positioning as a critic of the existing international order. In recent years, the Islamic Republic of Iran, within the framework of a strategic partnership, has shown notable alignment with China's revisionist agenda in the international landscape. China has demonstrated growing capacity to shape power dynamics and play a consequential role in international order-making; an ability that Iran, as one of the states seeking change in Asia's status quo, has often interpreted as an opportunity (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Zabihi, 1403; Turki & Shariati, 1402). The critical point, however, is to attend to the social dimension of this relationship. The Islamic Republic of Iran should, on the one hand, develop a precise understanding of the strategic behavior and practices of the key actors shaping the emerging order, and, on the other hand, formulate a strategy appropriate to its current and desired position by relying on the available capacities and the political will of both elites and the wider public.

Although in recent years a notable strategic alignment has emerged between Iran and China in economic and international arenas and a growing body of scholarship has examined different dimensions of this relationship, existing studies have generally focused on macro and official levels and have paid less attention to Iranian elites' intersubjective and social perceptions of China's role. The absence of a systematic assessment of elite attitudes, given elites' function as influential reference groups in shaping public opinion and policy agendas, constitutes a clear research gap in this field. A lack of precise and up-to-date understanding of Iranian elites' views of China may result in policies that face weak societal support and also public resistance—as observed in debates surrounding the 25-year Iran–China cooperation agreement (Hongda, Zarrin Najafabad, 1403). Moreover, an insufficient understanding of the multidimensional nature of China's power (economic, political–security, and cultural–social), together with unrealistic expectations may lead to misalignment in prioritizing national interests and to the adoption of ineffective strategies in engagement with China.

Drawing on constructivist approaches in International Relations, which emphasize the social construction of political realities, this study employs a survey research design to analyze Iranian elites' attitudes as an intersubjective reality that influences the policymaking process. The study's analytical framework is based on four variables—performance, trust, importance, and opportunity—through which China's role is assessed across three domains: economic, cultural–social, and political–security. This study was conducted within the geopolitical setting of the Islamic Republic of Iran from March 2024 to March 2025. It focuses on the intellectual, political, economic, and cultural attitudes of Iran's elites under current international conditions and amid China's growing role as a global actor. Accordingly, the study's main questions are as follows: (1) How do Iranian elites evaluate China's performance in the economic, political–security, and cultural–social domains in Iran and in the world? (2) To what extent do Iranian elites trust China's role and its strategic interactions with Iran? (3) From the perspective of Iranian elites, how is China's importance as a strategic partner for Iran assessed in comparison with other global powers? (4) Do Iranian elites view China's role in the international system primarily as an opportunity for Iran or as a threat? Which parameters shape this assessment?

1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical framework of this paper draws on constructivist accounts of meaning-making in social contexts. It is combined with approaches in foreign policy analysis that emphasize the influence of public opinion and social groups—particularly elites and experts—on foreign policy decision-making. From a constructivist perspective on social phenomena, particular attention must be paid to the agency of human actors in both apprehending and constructing social realities; in this sense, "reality is socially constructed" (Berger & Luckmann, 2016: 7). If this approach is to be used for foreign policy analysis, it should be noted that people of society are not passive beings. They have a significant contribution to social phenomena understandings, including the understanding of foreign relations and international affairs. Constructed realities can become stabilized in the collective mind of a community and generate practical consequences—such as specific judgments about relations with a particular country or the formation of concrete expectations regarding foreign policy in a given domain. Accordingly, the views and attitudes of citizens and especially elites, toward the role and presence of an external actor can directly affect the formulation, implementation, and domestic reception of foreign policy.

A substantial body of studies in foreign policy analysis has examined the impact of public opinion, experts, and intellectual elites on foreign policy. As stated by Moshirzadeh (1396: 233), each and every foreign policy decision is made within a specific domestic context. Alden and Aran (2011) also point out that public opinion is a broad term that constitute the general public, informed and active social groups and multiple lobbying and influential groups. In the present study, focusing on China's role in Iran and in the world, as our approach is oriented toward a specialized assessment of China's presence and toward offering guidance to foreign policy decision-makers, elite perspectives have been taken into account. In Iran, China is commonly viewed primarily as an economic actor, and popular perceptions of China are often shaped around economic issues. Understanding of China in the political–security and cultural–social domains is comparatively more limited. Precisely because of this lack of sufficiently multidimensional knowledge at the mass level, this study turns to academic, economic, and media elites in order to draw more precise and reliable conclusions about perceptions of China.

This study employs a survey design to measure and analyze

Iranian elites' attitudes toward China's role and presence. The study population consists of Iranian elites in three spheres: academic, economic, and media. These groups were selected because of their specialized knowledge, their position as sources of intellectual authority, and their intermediary role between public opinion and the policymaking apparatus. Given the dispersion of the target population and constraints of access, the study used purposive sampling. Eligibility criteria for completing the questionnaire included: (1) a substantial record of specialized activity (teaching, research, management, or analysis) in one of the three spheres noted above; (2) publications or recognized public positions related to foreign policy, the international economy, or Iran–China relations; and (3) willingness to participate in the study. The final sample size, following questionnaire distribution and collection, was 250 respondents. In this study, the attitudes of a group of Iranian elites toward China's presence and role are assessed using four variables: performance, trust, importance, and opportunity. The performance variable refers to observed behavioral realities from the respondents' standpoint — namely, respondents' evaluations of what China has done thus far in the economic, political, and social domains, together with their assessment of what China or Iran may be able to do in practice in the future. By contrast, trust concerns respondents' expectations and perceptions regarding the role and presence of China as an actor in Iran and in the world. Given differing levels of sensitivity, elite expectations are anticipated to vary accordingly. Importance concerns the reciprocal significance of Iran and China for one another. Taking Iran's position in the international system into account, this variable asks whether, given China's status, there is a necessity for relations with China across economic, social, and political domains, and whether such relations generate benefits for Iran. Finally, opportunity concerns the capacities that China's presence in Iran and in the world can provide for Iran both now and in the future. Each of the four core variables is measured at two levels of analysis — domestic (China's role in Iran) and international (China's role in the global system) — and across the three substantive domains as listed in Table 1.

Table (1): Research focus areas

Domains	Indicator	Level of analysis
Economic	Goods	domestic, international
	Energy	domestic, international
	Technology	domestic, international
	Belt and Road Initiative	international
Cultural-social	Tourism	domestic
	Scientific exchanges	domestic
	Culture and art	domestic
Political-security	Region	domestic, international
	International organizations	domestic, international
	Great powers	domestic, international

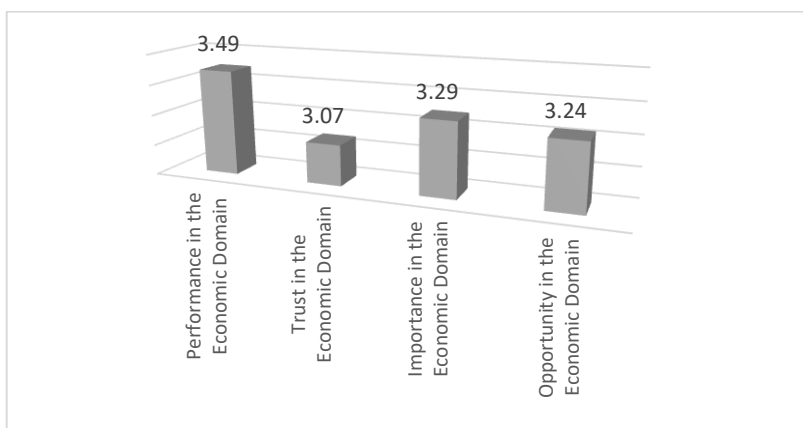
Source: (Author)

2. Elite Attitudes Toward China

With respect to participants' individual characteristics, men constituted 82% of the sample and women 18%. In terms of education, 36.5% of respondents held a PhD, 37% a master's degree, and 23.5% a bachelor's degree. Among the elites studied, 44% reported an academic field of activity, 28% an economic/commercial field, and 20% official media; 8% non-official media.

In the economic domain, the performance variable is evaluated as markedly stronger than the other variables. One explanation is the breadth of Iran–China economic interactions and the greater familiarity of Iranians with China as an economic actor. This relatively positive elite assessment is shaped by China's visible and significant presence in both Iran's economy and the global economy. According to the Iranian elites who participated in this study, China is a significant actor in the global economy in terms of economic performance. However, given the breadth of economic affairs, it is important to note that China's capacity to play a key role is not uniform across all sub-areas. Specifically, the findings indicate that China is perceived as substantially more influential in international trade and in goods and technology than in the energy economy (such as oil and gas). Accordingly, in the Iranian market, China is viewed as better positioned to meet certain Iranian needs in goods and advanced technologies than to contribute to the development of Iran's oil and gas industry. The majority of elites emphasize that expanding trade relations with China would create additional opportunities for Iran's economic development. They also stress

that, for China, economic cooperation with a wide range of countries, both developed and developing, is a necessity. At the same time, because economic relations are closely connected to everyday life, elites do not express equally favorable views regarding trust in China in the economic sphere. China's (gradually) more exclusive presence in parts of Iran's economy may also contribute to the formation of this more skeptical assessment. By contrast, the status of importance and opportunity is more favorable than that of trust. Given China's prominent position in the global economy, Iranian elites assess China's economic importance more positively and, on this basis, tend to interpret it as an opportunity.

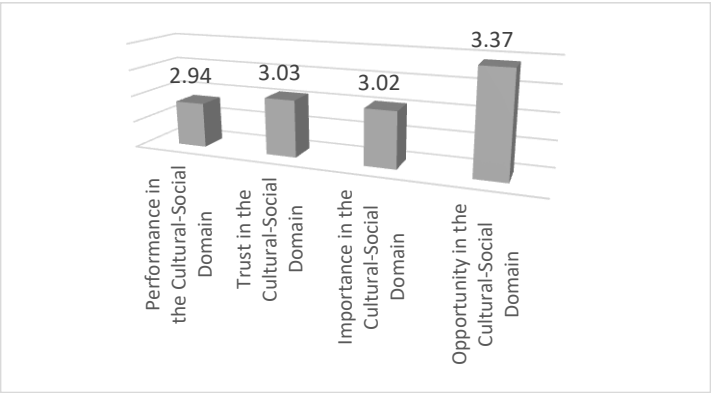


Source: (Author)

Figure (1): Variables' distribution in the economic domain

In the cultural–social domain, the opportunity variable stands out by a noticeable margin compared with the other three variables. This can be attributed to the relatively limited level of awareness and information within Iranian society regarding China in cultural and social matters, as well as the lack of extensive, tangible experience in this domain. Accordingly, elites tend to approach this domain primarily as an opportunity, one that could be operationalized and whose effects may become more observable in the future. With respect to the cultural and social domain, Iranian elites report no particular sensitivity regarding routine tourism and academic exchanges with China. Iran may be as attractive a tourism destination for Chinese visitors as it is for people from other parts of the world. The growth of academic exchanges between Iran and China can also be understood within the broader and expanding trend of the internationalization of universities in Iran as well as

elsewhere. In a world of widening cross-societal interaction, such exchanges are, in many respects, unsurprising. What is more consequential, however, concerns identity-based differences. From the perspective of the Iranian elites surveyed, Chinese culture, particularly its literature, art, and philosophy, does not appear to align strongly with the tastes and preferences of Iranian society. This is not unique to Iran. Chinese cultural diplomacy and soft-power projection have faced notable challenges in attracting audiences in a range of global contexts, to the extent that addressing these limitations has become an explicit concern for Chinese policymakers.

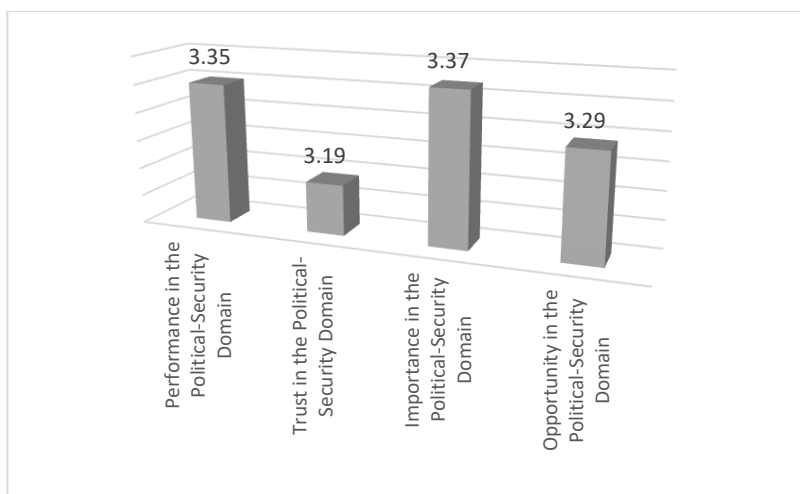


Source: (Author)

Figure (2): Variables' Distribution in the Cultural-Social Domain

In the political–security domain, the importance variable is rated most favorably, while trust records the lowest mean score among elites. With respect to importance, elites articulate their expectations of China in light of its standing in the international system (particularly its role in international organizations and among the major powers). Iran's specific circumstances, including U.S.-led international pressure and sanctions, appear to shape this evaluation. With respect to the political–security domain, a central point is the heightened sensitivity of issues in this area. The majority of the elites participating in this study believe that China has no hesitation about playing a political and security role in the Middle East. However, this does not imply that China's regional agenda aligns with the Islamic Republic of Iran's political and security priorities. It is clear that China seeks a more visible presence in major regional arenas such as the Middle East; yet it is even clearer that Beijing designs its Middle East policies in accordance with its own national-

interest priorities. It is not implausible that differences and conflicts exist between Iranian and Chinese political–security priorities in the region. This consideration is equally relevant to China's role in international organizations. For years, China has sought to leverage participation in international institutions to advance its position as a powerful actor in global politics, and it has been notably successful. At the same time, a core principle frequently emphasized in China's foreign-policy discourse is to avoid confrontation and tension at the global level. Consequently, in international organizations China often attempts, where possible, to avoid entering into severe political conflicts with other major powers. This logic also applies to China's positions on major international issues in which Iran is involved. Therefore, from the perspective of Iranian elites, one cannot assume that China's orientations in international organizations will necessarily be favorable to Iran or produce outcomes aligned with the Islamic Republic's preferences. Given China's role and orientation in the Middle East, as well as its stated positions in international organizations, the performance variable ranks second in elites' assessments. By contrast, trust in China is not assessed favorably. Based on elites' beliefs and past experience with China's behavior, trust occupies a comparatively weak position in their evaluations.



Source: (Author)

Figure (3): Variables' Distribution in the Political-Security Domain

Conclusion

This paper aims to offer practical policy recommendations for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran toward China across the economic, cultural–social, and political–security domains. To connect the findings from the elite-attitude survey to policymakers' decision-making processes, the paper uses the concept of "national interest" as a key analytical bridge. It is both intelligible to elites (as informed representatives of society) and operationally useful for decision-makers as a guiding framework for foreign policy formulation. As stated by Burchill (2005), national interest is a significant social construct which should be considered as one of the main variables of state behavior. We believe that national interest as a dynamic and social criterion is a necessary prerequisite in effective foreign policy making, especially with China. The overall pattern of elite perceptions presents China as a pivotal actor in the international economy, one that continually seeks alternative opportunities to expand commercial influence and access new markets.

From the perspective of Iran's national interest, deepening economic relations with China appears necessary, but it should proceed with strategic considerations including: market diversification and competitiveness—expanding trade with China should be treated as an opportunity rather than a path to exclusivity; differentiating China's role in the energy sector—policy should distinguish between China as an energy buyer and China as a reliable and efficient investor in Iran's oil and gas development; a smart approach to emerging technologies—the core principle should be technology transfer and localization; and active utilization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—Iran should, with a realistic appraisal of its own capacities, treat the BRI as an opportunity to advance national interests. Elites' understanding of Iran's national interest in cultural–social engagement with China centers on expanding bilateral interaction with awareness of capacities while preserving identity. This includes developing tourism ties with China, expanding scientific and academic exchanges, and enabling deep and genuine cultural interaction free from directive official intervention.

Elite attitudes in the political-security domain emphasize the cautious and interest-driven nature of China's policy and the need for Iranian strategic autonomy. In regional policy, Iran's national interest requires formulating regional policy independently, grounded in its own characteristics as a regional power rather than relying primarily on Chinese support. In international organizations, reliance on Chinese support should be conditioned on building and strengthening "necessary leverage" in bilateral relations. Regarding U.S.–China competition, Iran's national interest does not permit building the foundations of foreign policy on that rivalry. International politics is an arena of opportunity use. In specific and time-bound cases, Iranian policymakers may exploit openings created by this competition, but this cannot become a standing principle of Iran's foreign policy. Iran's approach should remain anchored in independent national interests and active, pragmatic opportunity-seeking within a dynamic and increasingly multipolar environment.

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