

China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Likely Challenges for India

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Abstract

The recent geopolitical transformations that have seen a strengthening of India-U.S. bilateral relations along with strained U.S.-Iran and U.S.-China ties have pushed India into a difficult strategic position with Iran. Along with the heightened India-China tensions, the proposed China-Iran deal gives China more leverage with Iran, impacting India's long-term strategic economic relations with the latter. The recent agreements and partnership between Iran and China reflected in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the draft 25- year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) will pave the way for long-term strategic cooperation between the two countries. The agreement per se and the growing closer ties between Beijing and Tehran can have challenges for India's relations with Iran and interests in the Persian Gulf region. Nonetheless, it is unlikely to affect India-Iran bilateral ties that remain robust seriously and has withstood challenges earlier, and the comprehensive strategic partnership shall not be an exception. India's stake in the situation hinges on its interest in Iranian natural gas reserves and its desire for continued

participation in the Chabahar port project with Iran. With the deal now inked, and considering India's changing geopolitical and security environment vis-a-vis China, what are the key implications of the China-Iran pact for India? How can New Delhi respond to Beijing's major drive to support Tehran?

Keywords: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, China-Iran Relations, India, Belt and Road Initiative.

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Introduction

China's engagement with the Persian Gulf and West Asia region has significantly expanded in the past two decades. It is driven by trade, economic cooperation and investments. China is among the biggest trading partners for the regional countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and is a leading investor in infrastructure and connectivity projects such as Madinat al Hareer (Silk City) in Kuwait and Port and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm in Oman. Though many of these investment projects precede the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they have been incorporated into the ambit of BRI (Fulton, 2019). The West Asian countries have welcomed Chinese investments as a way to enhance their infrastructure and support business start-ups in information technology (IT), tourism, retail, energy and other sectors. Additionally, China is taking interest in regional politics and conflicts with the stated objective of promoting peace and stability in West Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Though China maintains

a neutral stance on regional affairs, Beijing's growing economic stakes have made it more invested in West Asia. Among the regional countries with which China has developed close cooperation is Iran. China and Iran have gradually improved their bilateral relations with Iran emerging as a leading oil supplier for China since the 1990s and China emerging as the top trading partner of Iran since the 2000s (Yacoubian ,2019). The bilateral relations were further strengthened through the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 wherein China, along with Russia, played a crucial role in the finalization of the deal. In January 2016, during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Tehran, China and Iran issued a joint statement expressing the intention to upgrade the bilateral relations to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”.

This article focuses on the China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its potential impact on Iran-China relations in the long term and its effects on India. With the deal now inked and considering India's changing geopolitical and security environment vis-a-vis China, what are the key implications of the China-Iran pact for India. How can New Delhi respond to Beijing's major drive to support Tehran? The argument is that the Iran-China Strategic Partnership Agreement is a response by Iran to US sanctions. The success of this agreement, as well as its effects on Iran-India relations (as an ally of the United States), will depend on the success or failure of future negotiations between Iran and the United States. Therefore, although the three countries have various strategies in the international system, they have to cooperate with each other due to their national interests.

The work is based on primary sources such as official governmental documents, speeches of influential politicians, and official statistical data. Besides these sources, information

from secondary sources was taken into consideration. These sources were relevant monographs, reports, and academic articles. For this purpose, the paper is divided into three parts. The first part briefly delves into the first part, Iran-China relations are briefly discussed. In the second part, Iran-India relations are examined, and then the possible challenges of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Iran and China on India's interests are discussed. This research is written based on a descriptive-analytical method to give a complete picture of the Iran-China Strategic Comprehensive Agreement, its efforts, and its consequences for India.

I-Conceptual Framework

One of the assumptions in “Balance of Power” and “Balance of Threat” (Walt, 1985, p.42) theories is that when countries face a threatening power, their primary strategy is balancing against that country. This is because the primary purpose of the countries in the anarchy situation is to provide and guarantee security. Thus, the bandwagoning strategy is hardly ever adopted by countries (Schweller, 1995, p.72) because it is not a guarantee of the survival of nations, or at least independence and freedom of action; hence, countries lean more toward the balancing strategy rather than bandwagoning (Baghainia, 2019:5).

Randall L. Schweller acknowledges Walt's contribution of expanding the realist explanation of state behavior by adding the variables of proximity, offensive capability, and perceived intention to that of overall power vis a vis a potential adversary. However, Schweller questions the basic assumptions of Walt and his antecedent Waltz. In Scheele's view, both Walt and Waltz assume that states act to preserve what they already possess, that all states have a status quo orientation, as opposed to Morgenthau's earlier work that emphasized states

compulsion to maximize their power (Gangale, 2003, p. 12). Criticizing the assumptions of Walt and Waltz's theory, Schweller proposes the "Balance of Interests" theory. According to Schweller, both Walt and Waltz viewed governments as non-aggressive and defensive. Schweller rejects this view and believes we would not see a war in international relations history if this were correct. Walt considers uncertainty for the cause of war, while Schweller believes that some states are revisionists and some maintain the status quo (Baghainia,2019:5). In fact, "he proposes a theory which has a dual meaning, one at the unit level and one at the systemic level. The unit-level refers to the costs a state is willing to pay to defend its values relative to the costs it is willing to pay to extend its values. At the systemic level, it refers to the relative strengths of the status quo and revisionist states" (Gangale, 2003, p. 15). Notably, we have two types of revisionist governments such as a revisionist with "Limited Aims" and the one with "Unlimited Aims". (Baghernia,2019). Limited aim revisionists are toward bandwagoning. However, unlimited ones tend to balance the powerful countries. Schweller argues that "the aim of balancing is self-preservation of values already possessed, while the goal of band wagoning is usually self-extension to obtain values coveted" (Gangale, 2003, p. 12). Thus, according to the assumptions of the Sheller's theory, India is considered as a limited aim revisionist country that bandwagons the United States (Schweller, 2011:292).

In contrast, China and Iran are appeared to be unlimited aim revisionists, balancing the power of the United States. India's ever-rising growth makes the country diversify its relations with various countries, particularly the United States; however, Iran as an Islamic country has adopted different approaches, contracting India's aims. For instance, India is in favor of the

United States, whereas, Iran is opposed to the country. Hence, what can stand out is that India and Iran relations might experience several difficulties due to other goals and strategies. In contrast, Iran and China are more likely to develop lasting cooperation in light of the same interests in the international system (although they have different ideologies).

II-Iran and China Relations: An Overview

China's engagement with the Persian Gulf and West Asia region has significantly expanded in the past two decades. It is driven by trade, economic cooperation, and investments. China is among the biggest trading partners for the regional countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and is a leading investor in infrastructure and connectivity projects such as Madinat al-Hareer (Silk City) in Kuwait and Port and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Duqm in Oman (Modaser,2021). Though many of these investment projects precede the 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they have been incorporated into the ambit of BRI. The West Asian countries have welcomed Chinese investments as a way to enhance their infrastructure and support business start-ups in information technology (I.T.) Communications like G5Network (Fulton,2019), tourism, retail, energy, and other sectors (Andersen,2019:9). Additionally, China is interested in regional politics and conflicts with the stated objective of promoting peace and stability in West Asia. Though China maintains a neutral stance on regional affairs, Beijing's growing economic stakes have made it more invested in West Asia.

Among the regional countries with which China has developed close cooperation is Iran. China's interest in Iran goes beyond its energy resources. It is keen on Iran's geostrategic location, bordering both the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf (Ghoshal, 2016). The location enables China to

carry out the One Belt One Road agenda. Iran stands as China's most important ally in the Persian Gulf. Given their positive ties with the United States, China may find it challenging to deepen cooperation with Persian Gulf Cooperation Council Countries.

On the other hand, due to historic ties with China and longstanding suspicion of the United States, Iran remains a trustworthy ally for China (Will & Taylore,2021, p.18). The year 2021 marks 50 years of relations between China and Iran. The past decade has been consequential for both countries and, hence, the development of their bilateral relations. Although Iran has gradually come out of international isolation, it remains under international sanctions (Yacoubian,2019). China has markedly boosted its diplomatic engagement with Iran since 2015, coinciding with the signing of the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the JCPOA) and the gradual easing of international sanctions on Iran in accord with the deal (Will and Taylore,2021, p.5). The Rouhani administration's intention for constructive re-engagement and cooperation with the world has broadened new avenues of relations and cooperation. During the same time, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his dream to reclaim China's prominence in the world through domestic economic strength (Belal,2020:48). This coincidence led to the deepening of relations between Beijing and Tehran in economic and trade ties, investment and infrastructure development; political and diplomatic support; and the cooperation within the BRI and the CSP (president.ir,2016).

Recent developments between Iran and China are of particular concern to India and a deadly diplomatic blow to India's foreign policy. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership concluded between the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the People's Republic of China includes a \$400 billion Chinese investment in the former over 25 years in Iran's

petrochemical sectors and its transportation and manufacturing infrastructure (Tasnim,2021). China could develop free-trade zones around the country and, at the same time, it would get access to cheaper Iranian oil as Iran is to provide a regular and discounted supply of oil to China for 25 years, as per the agreement. By comparison, Iran, which is in dire need of economic and military assistance, will rightly benefit from China's growing influence and investment across the countries of Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (Rana,2020). To have a voice on a global scale and confront U.S. domination around the world, Iran intends to take advantage of the rivalries between two superpowers. It is willing to be a recipient of Chinese largesse in the form of investment. The U.S. has contributed significantly in providing *raison d'être* for such a pact. Neither China nor Iran is expecting any goodwill from the U.S. (Kumar,2021). They perceive that the adversarial mindset in America is only hardening under President Joe Biden's watch. As for Tehran, it no longer pins hope that Biden will revive the JCPOA or lift sanctions anytime soon Thus, without doubt, pushing back against the U.S. unilateralism and sanctions is a leitmotif of the China-Iran strategic partnership.

Political Aspects: The Middle East, including Iran, constitutes a core part of the new Chinese project. Andrew Scobell quite rightly points out that the region "has become of greater importance to China than ever before. Beijing now seems to perceive the Middle East as an extension of China's periphery and a zone of fragility. Moreover, China has become concerned about the stability of regimes in the region after being largely agnostic for many decades" (Scobell, 2018: 9). The current level of Iran's relations with the People's Republic of China could be described as positive and constructive. Their bilateral relations are more and more complex and dynamic.

Such a pragmatic alliance is a result of the political pressure from the West and economic necessity. Both the Chinese and Iranians perceive the American presence in Asia as a threat to their national security.

For this reason, the PRC and Iran undertake activities that aim at limiting the U.S.'s sphere of influence in the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Moreover, this is the main reason why their policies are also attractive to the Russian Federation. This powerful political trio has an almost unlimited political potential to block any American or any other Western initiative in Asia. (China's Foreign, 2015: 205) Moreover, China sells military equipment to Iran, and both states cooperate on several security issues.

Energy cooperation: Energy cooperation constitutes one of the key elements of the BRI framework and lays out extensive Chinese investment in the Iranian energy industry. Beijing offers Tehran a market for its energy exports and Chinese investment in its energy infrastructure; Iran, in turn, enables China to diversify its energy sources not to be overly reliant on Saudi Arabia or Russia. Iran has some of the world's largest proven oil and natural gas (Hughes, 2015). Tehran deposits contain an estimated 157 billion barrels of crude oil and another 1,193 trillion cubic feet of natural gas deposits, making those the fourth- and second-largest deposits in the world, respectively. The abundance of energy reserves, Iran's relative proximity to China, and its geopolitical location in the Middle East make Iran one of the world's most important oil producers an attractive partner for China (Garver, 2006) the world's largest energy consumer.

Iran is the only country in the Middle East with the potential to meet part of China's oil and gas needs through both land and sea. Currently, all Iranian oil exports to China are conducted by sea. Still, Central Asia and Pakistan are two potential land

routes that could connect Iran's energy resources to the Chinese market. Furthermore, Iran's location enables it to connect its energy infrastructure of the Middle East countries involved in the BRI. Tehran has already connected parts of its energy infrastructure to some of the other important Silk Road countries such as Turkmenistan, Turkey (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017). Development of the ties between Tehran and these countries in the form of separate trilateral cooperation initiatives with the participation and investment of Chinese companies could be regarded as another potential area for cooperation.

In 2013, China was the most important buyer of Iranian oil and received about one-third of Iranian oil exports (Zhao, 2014). In the post-JCPOA era, almost all of Iran's oil exports go to China and Syria. China is the only country that buys Iranian oil now (Reuters, 2019). Iran, a close ally of Damascus, is heavily involved in the Syrian conflict and uses the country to continue the oil flow to its customers and bypass U.S. sanctions (Zalayati, 2019). In the first quarter of 2020, according to the latest data by tanker trucking companies, Iran exports just 170,000 barrels a day, with China taking 82,000 barrels and the rest going to Syria (Radio Farda, 2020).

According to IEA, in the mid-2000s, China became the world's second-largest energy consumer (International Energy Agency (IEA), 2007) and it surpassed the US in annual growth crude oil import in 2017. According to EIA estimation, the increase in the Chinese energy consumption in 2017 to 13.2 million b/d (U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2018). The growth of petroleum consumption in China accounted for virtually two-thirds of incremental global oil consumption in 2019 (EIA, 2020). Thus, trade relations with resource-rich countries, including Iran, have enlarged significantly. China is predicted to remain the world's largest

energy consumer until approximately 2030. In the meantime, China is wasting no time in availing itself of Iran's energy resources. China's demand for oil imports is expected to grow from 6 million barrels per day (BPD) to 13 million BPD by 2035, and Iran is considered a reliable supplier (Ghoshal, 2016). Iran needs to attract \$105 billion investment to replace the old technology and raise the oil production to 5 million barrels per day by 2025 (GOV.UK, 2020). The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) currently has 515 projects and 88 megaprojects and 2000 subprojects on its agenda (Iranian Petro-Energy Information Network, 2017). The Chinese response to the new round of unilateral sanctions has been tepid. To some extent, unsatisfactory to both the United States and Iran. Beijing partially filled the vacuum left by European companies forced to abandon Iran (Calabrese et al., 2018). From January 2017 through September 2018, Beijing imported at least 630,000 BPD from the Islamic Republic. By March 2019, China was importing over 613,000 BPD, and in April, its imports reached 800,000 BPD or more as the waiver period drew to a close. Reports suggest that China imported between 163,000 and 186,000 BPD in June, 101,000 and 226,000 BPD in July, and 105,000 and 186,000 BPD in August 2019 (Katz, 2020).

Prior to the expiration of the SREs, China had stockpiled 20 million barrels of Iranian oil at its Dalian port. The Islamic Republic sent the oil to Dalian ahead of the reintroduction of U.S. sanctions last November 2018, as it looked for alternative storage for a backlog of crude at home. The oil is being held in bonded storage tanks at the port (Chen & Tan, 2019). Chinese oil companies have made arrangements to keep Iranian oil flowing after U.S. sanctions come into force (Paraskova, 2018). For example, they have switched to using Iranian tankers to deliver the oil, to sidestep sanctions and reduce their own risk

(Tan, 2018). Meanwhile, the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions helped China secure deep discounts on Iranian oil, while selling Chinese goods to Tehran at inflated prices paid from the restricted Iranian oil funds sitting in escrow accounts at Chinese banks (Rogin, 2018).

In the previous sanctions, Chinese businesses and companies significantly expanded their commercial presence in Iran, stepping in as Western companies exited the market (Scita, 2019). In the face of U.S. maximum pressure policy, Iran's government has hopes that China would continue to purchase crude oil in high volumes and invest in energy development projects as a mechanism to “offset” pressure from the United States as Iran typically aims to do (Shahvar, 2020).

China is a major factor in the effectiveness of any U.S. sanctions regime on Iran because it remains Iran's largest oil customer. China has made no overt, legal effort to shield its oil trade from the long arm of American law. The extent to which China and Iran further develop their economic ties and energy cooperation will have significant enduring consequences for the BRI (Will and Taylore, 2021). In the face of U.S. maximum pressure policy and sanctions, Iran can play a central role in the economic and geostrategic objectives that China seeks to achieve through the BRI. Thus, the threat of sanctions is to scare away many foreign companies from doing business in Iran. This will leave a void that Chinese oil companies will likely fill and gain a near-monopoly in the Iranian energy sector (Scita, 2019). It can also cause Tehran to become more amenable to China's BRI.

III-India and Iran Relations: An Overview

In the present century, India and Iran are trying to strengthen their relations by adapting to new realities. Sahgol and Anand (2010:52) found that terrorism and its various connections have

prioritized their long-standing relationship. And it is no exaggeration to say that Indo-Iranian relations in the 21st century belong to the geopolitics of the port. India and Iran signed the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) Intergovernmental Agreement with Russia in September 2000 in St. Petersburg, which entered into force on May 16, 2002. The INSTC was expected to become a facilitator for strengthening Indo-Eurasian economic cooperation. India had further concretized its relations with Iran by signing the Chabahar Port agreement in 2003. Tishehyar (2011: 135) has highlighted the geopolitical importance of Iran's work with India on the Chabahar Port that it would provide viable and rapid access to the Eurasian region. Kharazmi (2016) writes that India's role in helping Iran during the difficult times of international sanctions in the past and present cannot be ignored.

India is using many opportunities and possibilities to restore its relations with Iran. Ningthoujam (2020) has listed two options; the incumbent Modi government could strengthen its diplomacy toward West Asia through Energy Trade and regional connectivity. Second, India and Iran could play a significant role in the landlocked Afghanistan, which has become a most challenging task after the withdrawal of the American forces. Tishehyar (2011:136) argument that the Chabahar Port is parallel to China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) in Pakistan, which would benefit Iran individually in the economic development and multilaterally in the completion of INSTC project. Thus, these possibilities make Iran an important trade/transit hub at the heart of Eurasia. Also, it opens a window of opportunities for India.

India and Iran have been discussing a US\$4.5 billion undersea gas pipeline to strengthen connectivity between Chabahar and Gujarat (India), which would pass off Pakistan's

exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Given Russia's dominance of gas pipelines, Iran intends to connect Turkmen gas to a port that has already begun to connect via pipelines and railways. This strengthens India-Iran-Afghanistan trade with the Eurasian region and reduces time and costs (Azish & Parviz, 2016). In addition, Oman has shown interest in Iran's Hindu underwater pipeline due to its proximity to Chabahar. It would also reinforce Iran-Oman relations on their multi-modal transport project articulated in the "Ashgabat Agreement" of 2011. Therefore, these two transit pacts would benefit Iran to revive its economy in the post-sanctions' era (Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD), Islamic Republic of Iran, 2017). However, India's interest in Oman's Duqm Port and Iran's good political relations with Oman can complement the Chabahar project. And also, these two ports are part of the INSTC transit route to Eurasia. It makes the Chabahar Port geopolitically more significant (Chaudhury, 2016). Therefore, these equations would take Indo-Iran cooperation over Chabahar Port to new heights in regional connectivity.

India's Eurasia connectivity via Iran: The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the emergence of Central Asian states created new opportunities and challenges in the region. India had lost its direct land connectivity with the Eurasian region. On the contrary, China has emerged as a regional competitor to India for its vested interests. In several aspects, China has the edge over India due to sharing long borders with Central Asia. According to Yazdani's study (2007:356), Iran has taken many steps to improve its relations with China in the vis-à-vis of unstable relations with Western countries. In 2005, it placed Iran under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) umbrella as an observer member to strengthen energy trade ties with the Middle East (Sakhoja, 2012: 391). Finally, with the support of

China and Russia in 2021, it became a permanent member of the treaty (president.ir, September 2021). Pant (2008:125–126) writes that the growing Sino-Iranian relationship could challenge New Delhi's move toward the port of Chabahar and deprive it of geopolitics. China's participation could drastically affect Indian efforts to connect Central Asia through its policy frameworks and proposed infrastructures (Ranjan, 2013). China's interests in both ports are very clear; Beijing is looking to enter the Arabian Sea and monitor trade and strategic activities, thereby reducing Indian influence in the Indian Ocean. Against this geopolitically surcharged environment, Iran has kept its option open for finding space and economic presence in the Chinese and Indian markets in the coming years. Tehran has always been trying to increase its strategic cooperation with New Delhi. Tehran does not want to put all its assets in China's basket like any other regional power. But here, India could not seize the opportunity due to its growing partnership with the United States. India's growing relationship with the United States has played a key role in India's decision-making process with Iran over the past few years (Biography, 2020). on the other hand, Iran's decision is more related to the loss of Iran's trust in India as a reliable regional partner that can ignore U.S. pressure.

IV-Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

On March 27, China signed a landmark 25-year Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Iran, marking a renewed commitment to their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2016 (Chari,2021) News reports have claimed that the deal may be worth \$400 billion in Chinese investments and provide Beijing with a source of cheap oil for the coming quarter-century (Tasnim,2021). The finalization of the deal – a draft of the 18-page document leaked in June 2020 – caused a

media frenzy, with many concerned that China and Iran were looking to form a new axis in the Middle East to undermine the United States and India. Historically, China's relationship with Iran has been a positive, albeit a primarily limited one. China has been exceedingly careful in its dealings with the turbulent Middle East; it has cautiously adhered to a balanced policy of not cozying up to Iran and maintaining an equidistant relationship with rival Persian Gulf nations like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The China-Iran deal has been widely claimed a game-changer for the region and a cornerstone for China's footprint in West Asia. The \$400 billion investment figure is both unsourced and unrealistic, considering that Chinese FDI in Iran totaled just \$3.23 billion in 2018. Further, the Strategic Cooperation Agreement conforms to similar agreements between Beijing and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, currently in the works (Duggal,2021). The deal is thus meant to reinforce the "strategic" element to the China-Iran partnership through a grand political statement, but not materially elevate.

This emerging political synergy makes the China-Iran agreement a strategic concern for India. Both Beijing and Tehran are subject to U.S. sanctions; these sanctions have been crippling for Iran and made courting Chinese investment ever-more important. While Chinese investments may not amount to the massive \$400 billion figure often quoted, they nevertheless fill a crucial gap for Tehran. Iran's foremost objective will thus be to attract increasing investments(dhyeyaias,2021). The Beijing-Tehran connection could hinder New Delhi's strategic aims with Iran and foreign policy engagement with the region. In other words, as Iran attempts to curry increasing favor with China, it could make critical concessions to Beijing that may weaken a competing or emerging actor like India's position in the Persian Gulf region.

The deal could allow for China's investment in Iran to be an extension of its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by linking the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline to CPEC and acting as a bridge between Islamabad and Tehran (Raeisi,2021). Beijing's promise to safeguard the Iran nuclear deal and its recent provision of COVID-19 vaccines to Tehran are carefully calibrated moves in this direction (Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA,2021). However, this could quickly change as Beijing's rivalry with Washington escalates; the Strategic Cooperation Agreement provides the treaty framework for just such a surge in bilateral ties.

Under such circumstances, India – which has increasingly found synergy with the United States in the security domain could be confronted with a China-led alliance of hostile nations. While a China-Iran-Pakistan-Russia-Turkey axis is not a reality yet, it could very well take shape shortly and pose a severe national security challenge for India. China is already extending its activities in the Indian Ocean, where New Delhi has long feared a so-called “String of Pearls” network encircling India (Khurana,2018:38). The emergence of a similar axis to India's north with a trans-Himalayan Quad and the proposed alliance of five nations would encircle India entirely and severely limit its outreach capabilities. (Duggal,2021). Besides trade and business, there is strategic significance to the agreement. Firstly, both Iran and China remain at odds with the U.S. Their objectives are to embrace landlocked states in Central Asia and establish land connections with Western Asia, Europe, and African partners. Also, to become independent from naval powers, especially the U.S. Navy, which controls all strategic points on the maritime Route connecting East Asia with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Secondly, the strategic cooperation agreement acquires significance in the regional geopolitics in the Persian Gulf and

West Asia. The regional allies and partners of the U.S., namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, see Iran as a security threat. One of the major factors that led to the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Persian Gulf Arab countries, namely Bahrain and the UAE. Therefore, for Tehran, the security and strategic relations with China and Russia are essential to navigate regional geopolitics. For Moscow and Beijing, who follow a multi-aligned policy in the region, better relations with Iran are a way to challenge the U.S. hegemony, as was signaled through the December 2019 Russia-China-Iran joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman (Reuters, December 27, 2019).

Thirdly, Iran seeks greater cooperation with China to overcome its domestic sociopolitical challenges that the economic sanctions have exacerbated. Iran has faced severe internal unrest during 2019 due to growing economic hardships. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ineffective response of the government have further complicated the domestic situation. The hardliners in Iran, who had earlier opposed the nuclear deal, continue to fight its revival, arguing that it did not bring the promised economic relief (Moddaser and Lakshmi,2021:10). And they are inclined towards China and Russia; they fully support so Comprehensive Strategic agreement. Fourthly, the strategic cooperation agreement envisages China-Iran collaboration in the security domain. China has already been expanding its naval and military presence in the western Indian Ocean, and a strategic understanding with Iran will help Beijing expand its military footprints in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean region (Garlick and Havlova,2020:33).

V-Likely Challenges for India

India's Central Asia Engagement: Most critically, such an alliance could hinder New Delhi's outreach to the West and Central Asia for India. With China-India ties at a new low since their Galwan Valley clash at their disputed border, New Delhi is trying to protect its regional influence; the Chabahar port, set to be completed within a year, is a key part of this strategy. Not only does it connect India to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan (which is currently the only Route of access), but Chabahar also acts as a balance to CPEC and a symbol of India's commitment to Iran and Afghanistan. India is reportedly poised to invest nearly \$500 million in the project (Mehrnews,2019) with a total commitment of 1 billion rupees (or \$13.4 million) in its Union Budget 2021-2022 alone. The project's importance in Indian perception is further demonstrated by India's proposal to commemorate "Chabahar Day" on March 4, 2021. However, should Iran be integrated into CPEC, India's continued access to the port could be in jeopardy (PTI,2016). Last year, reports suggested that India was suddenly dropped from the Chabahar rail project hours after news of Iran's Strategic Cooperation Agreement with China broke. Although the Indian Ministry of External Affairs recently confirmed that India remains engaged with the railway project, the incident goes to show the precarious and high-risk nature of India's investment, and how China may hold power to push India away from the region.

For India, Iran is an essential gateway to the five land-locked republics of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Roy,2012:961). Continued and positive engagement with Iran is crucial to Indian interests; the new agreement denotes Iran's increasing dependence on China, which could undermine Indian access. Further, India relies on Iran for access to Afghanistan, which is geopolitically, geo-

strategically, and geo economically crucial to New Delhi. As an all-weather-friend, India has actively promoted an “Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled” peace process and been a steadfast investor in the country’s future, funding construction of the parliament building and energy and infrastructure projects. India’s intense outreach is also drawn as a counter to Pakistan and balance for Chinese engagement (Duggal,2021). However, like Central Asia, Afghanistan remains accessible to India only through Iran and Pakistan. With Pakistan and now Afghanistan's route after the rise of the Taliban again blocked to India, Iran becomes all that more crucial; a China-Iran axis could be devastating for India’s engagement.

Chabahar Port and Indian Interests: The Chabahar port project, often seen as India’s strategic magnum opus in Iran, is also envisaged as a bridge between India, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The port itself is often seen as a counter-balance to Gwadar in Pakistan, built and run by China as part of its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) design (Lachungpa,2016). Now, Iran has not shied away by leveraging both China and Pakistan as potential investors for the Chabahar Special Economic Zone, challenging Indian public narratives of Chabahar seemingly being an India-exclusive project. With Chabahar being one of the few international trade routes operational for the Afghan economy. Sanctioning India from building upon and operating it would have been too myopic even for the Trump administration, thus creating the ground for China to occupy the strategic vacuum in the Middle East geopolitics (Raeisi,2021).

This 25-year agreement is being linked to reports that Iran has decided to construct the Chabahar-Zahedan railway line to the border with Afghanistan on its own because India continues to delay its implementation of the project. The project has not

been handed over to China at least not yet so the “India loses, China wins” narrative is premature.

Implication on Middle-East Geopolitics: China imports 10 million barrels of oil per day to meet its industrial needs, and Iran could potentially meet its demand. The economic clause in the Sino-Iranian agreement means that the steady supply of oil at a fixed price means a lot to China. Still, it contradicts the policy of the U.S., which is seeking to achieve Iran’s collapse in its domestic arena under a suffocating economic embargo. For decades now, the U.S. forces have dominated the Middle East’s security paradigm, but this agreement could now provide China with a foothold in the region.

China might militaries strategic ports at some point. In the proposed draft, China plans to build several ports in Iran, one of them at Jask, just outside the Strip of Hormuz, which is the entrance to the Persian Gulf. The Strip of Hormuz is among the nine key maritime chokepoints worldwide (Garlick& Havlova,2020:13). These chokepoints are controlled by the U.S., which many security analysts believe is a marker of U.S. strategic hegemony over the world. A Chinese port at Jask would give the Chinese a strategic vantage point on the waters through which much of the world’s oil transits (Raeisi,2021). The passage is of critical strategic importance to the U.S., whose Navy’s Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. China has also emerged as a major arms supplier to the Arab states and has conducted naval exercises with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Growing Chinese inroads in Iran will mean that China, on better diplomatic and political relations, can gain a competitive edge over India in getting developmental projects. Both India and China compete for the same economic opportunities in the Persian Gulf. Hence, both have long balanced their ties with the Persian Gulf countries to avoid getting entangled in regional

tensions (Modasser and Lakshmi, 2021). However, an extraordinary dependence on China can be counterproductive for Iran, which it would be keen to avoid.

Enhanced China's Position in the Indian Ocean: India is the largest power that the New Silk Road has virtually abandoned after the United States. The Chinese military's occupation of part of Kashmir in 1962 and Beijing's support for Islamabad against Delhi and the ongoing border clashes all reflect the depth and continuity of this tense relationship between the two countries (Raeisi,2021). The emergence of the Great Silk Road project has also affected the relationship between the two countries. Aside from the fact that the New Silk Road could strengthen Islamabad-Beijing ties and strengthen India's traditional rival in South Asia, the Karakorum Corridor crosses the Gilgit-Baltistan province of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. More importantly, the New Silk Road has created fears of siege among Indian policymakers and strategists. From Delhi's point of view, the geopolitical basis of such a fear is the Chinese "String of Pearls" (Khurana,2018:39). Pearl refers to offshore military bases and existing or potential Chinese trading ports. The chain also includes a network of such pearls over a vast expanse from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa that the Chinese Navy can interconnect. Specifically, this chain includes Chinese bases and ports in Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Djibouti, Tanzania, Pakistan and even Sudan. (Chau,2019) Combining the chain with the China-Pakistan economic corridor, which allows Beijing access to the Arabian Sea at the port of Gwadar, encircles Indian territory (Small,2018:25). It is no coincidence that India sees the pearl chain as a major threat to national security, regional politics, and territorial integrity.

In response, the Indians have pursued two policies. The first is strategic cooperation with the United States to contain China

in the Indian Ocean, known as the Indo-Pacific Strategy Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (quad) (Blumenthal, 2020). It is no coincidence that India is the most important U.S. security partner and commander of the Pacific States in the Indian Ocean. The second is the macro design of the Indian Maosam strategy. Maosam seeks to forge economic ties with ancient trading partners based on the creation of the Indian Ocean world centered on India (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2016). This area includes East and South Africa, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia (Ranjan, 2018: 152). From this point of view, it can be seen that India's presence in Chabahar is the first step in realizing Maosam's strategy in reaching Afghanistan, Central Asia and confronting the Chinese pearl chain, and connecting with the North-South economic corridor.

China–Iran deal, interestingly, is going to cement China's maritime security in the Indian Ocean. Beijing will initiate various infrastructure projects near Iran's Persian Gulf coastline, including the island of Qeshm, where Tehran intends to plan a major hub for oil production and storage, and free-trade zones in Abadan. China will also build infrastructure in the port city at Jask, adjacent to

the Strait of Hormuz that merely is 150 miles away from the Gwadar Port of Pakistan, where a Chinese company has already developed and operating a port. Observers are of the view that Chinese naval presence at Jask is expected to herald the path to greater joint military training and exercises among China, Iran and Pakistan, bolstering their position in the region (Singh, 2020).

Changing Strategic landscape: The Growing Iran-China relationship is a reason for worry and changing strategic landscape. It points to growing Chinese dominance in alignment with Pakistan, which threatens its relations with

Afghanistan. China-backed Pakistan-Iran-Taliban alignment emerging in India's immediate neighborhood is also a reason for Indian concern (Duggal,2021). Growing Chinese footsteps in Iran will have a long-lasting impact on India's relationship with Iran and Afghanistan, and Central Asian nations.

A new port at Jask at the mouth of the Hormuz Strait affects India too. If the port is to be operated by China just as Gwadar on the Pakistani coast nearby, then Chinese naval presence in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean would become significant. India's maritime security would be at further risk (dhyeyaias,2021). India finds itself caught in the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. & China over Iran.

Conclusion

India must rethink its Iran policy and recalibrate the way forward to detract from a possible China-Iran alliance. India cannot hope to compete with the massive amounts of funding that China can provide Tehran. However, it can broaden the scope of its cooperation with Iran to make its partnership a more strategic one. After years of crippling sanctions, Iran is suffering from a collapsing economy. It has steadily declined since the former U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2018, reversing the fast growth it experienced after the deal was signed in 2016. U.S. sanctions have particularly hit Iranian oil exports hard, and the IMF estimates that they will continue to fall in 2021 as world trade with Iran keeps declining. Simultaneously, Tehran is experiencing a widening trade deficit, high inflation, and a weak currency, rising unemployment, and a growing fiscal deficit. Sanction relief is, therefore, key for Tehran, and re-negotiating the nuclear deal is the first step toward this.

India has vital interests in the Persian Gulf and West Asia, including energy security, trade, the diaspora, and the fight against terrorism and extremism. Iran is an important regional player, and India has strong and friendly relations with Iran. Bilateral relations between the two countries have always resisted and remained sincere in the face of disturbances caused by external factors. This is evidenced by the exchange of ministerial meetings, regular diplomatic interactions and continued cooperation in developing projects. New Delhi attaches strategic importance to its relations with Iran, and in turn, Tehran views India as its vital economic and strategic partner.

Iran suffers from a difficult situation imposed by the United States because of the country's nuclear program. However, Iran has its own interests, such as economic growth and development, opposing U.S. unilateralism, and transferring revolutionary values that seem unachievable with all these sanctions. Thus, Tehran seeks to develop relations with other countries as a remedy to save itself. Relations with countries such as India and China can be effective because they need Iran for their energy requirements, the logistical location of Iran, and developing their projects. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. Based on the balance of interest's theory, three countries have different aims and ideologies. India is a limited revisionist, while Iran is an unlimited one. For instance, India favors the United States, whereas Iran is opposed to the country. It creates several restrictions in some areas. On the other side, Iran and China have different ideologies. China with a Communist Ideology differs from Iran's Islamic identity. Therefore, these differences contradict their relationships and act as a hindrance to developing relations. Nonetheless, Iran needs these countries at the moment to solve problems of

sanctions and achieve its interests. Tehran has to cooperate with both of them.

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