



## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### IRAN-CHINA POLITICAL RELATIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF MAJOR ISSUES

**Dr. M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi**

**Associate Professor**

**Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution**

**Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.**

#### ABSTRACT

*The Iranian emphasis during the past several years has been on expansion of relations with China, including political relations and exchange of high-level visits from both sides. This means Iran wants to build not just cordial relations with China but also enhance their strategic relationship. It could be argued, that the respective geopolitical situations of both Iran and China, as well as their particular requirements, capabilities, and constraints have encouraged them to seek closer collaboration in various sectors including political, energy, trade and economic and defence. Considering China's expected rising demand for energy and the continuation of Iran's political difficulties with the Western world especially with the US for the foreseeable future, it can be reasonably expected that Iran-China cooperation in various sectors will continue to remain an important factor in their bilateral relations.*

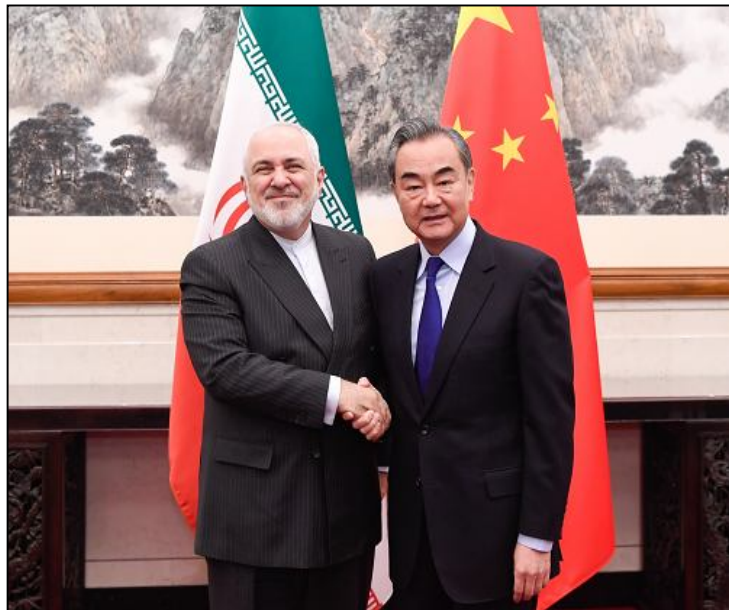
**KEYWORDS :** *political relations and exchange.*

#### INTRODUCTION :

Iran-China political and cultural relations are not new, it's began date back to the Silk Road era, and even today their ties are expanding progressively in every dimension. They also seem to share many cultural, historical, political, social, and

economic commonalities. However, Iran China strategic cooperation is yet to reach its full capacity. Iranian analysts articulate that Iran-China strategic ties would not only benefit the two countries but will help the stability and security of the region and the world. Commonalities in the foreign policy of Iran and China are not merely restricted to the common understanding of the adoption of similar stances. In fact, they enjoy a number of other important commonalities in their multilateral relations. Since both Iran and China consider themselves as developing countries and are members of the Group of 77 – the largest coalition of developing countries within the framework of the UN system. Moreover, as discussed, resistance to US “hegemony” and some shared aversion toward the West over its efforts to support democracy and human rights unite Iran and China.<sup>1</sup>

Iran-China Relations: Historical Background



During the past several years, Iran has emphasised the expansion of relations with China, including political relations, and exchange of high-level visits from both sides. Political relations between Iran and China began during the period of Han China and the Parthian Empire of Persia in 139 BCE, when a Chinese envoy named Zhang Qian travelled west to the northern bank of the Oxus River (today known as the Amu Darya River, roughly on the border between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) to interact with the Yuezhi tribes who were then advancing to destroy the Hellenistic kingdom of Bactria. The Han court had sent Zhang Qian to contact the Yuezhi in search of allies against the powerful horse-riding people, the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian did not reach Parthia but obtained detailed information of that powerful kingdom.<sup>ii</sup>

Diplomatic and trade relations between the Han and Parthian empires started via what appeared to be known as the Silk Road (actually a dozen or so caravan routes). The Persians played a key role in organising trade between China and the regions to its west. Large numbers of Persians, and later Arabs, settled in Guangzhou and Hanoi. The extremely Persianised kingdom of Kushan (a post-Bactrian, post-Yuezhi state created in the Oxus region) became the main centre for transmission of Buddhism to China in the second through the fourth centuries CE. Persian influences on Tang China were extensive, e.g., Magic routines from Persia were highly appreciated in China.<sup>iii</sup>

Official diplomatic relations between the two countries were established only in 1971. Ashraf Pahlavi, Shah's influential twin sister, visited China, in April 1971. The visit, which was extensively denounced at the time in revolutionary and leftist quarters, in Iran and elsewhere, should indeed be considered as the critical turning point in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Following the visit, the two countries established formal diplomatic-political relations and took steps towards mutual confidence building and cooperation. The state visit by China's Communist Party Chairman, Hua Kuofeng to Iran in late August 1978, amidst revolutionary turmoil in the country, was welcomed by the Shah; however, it was bluntly criticised by the opposition as an act of treason by the so-called anti-imperialist Chinese. The event left its negative impact on the state of relations after the emergence of the revolutionary regime in Iran a few months later. Post-1979, the relationship continued and increased even further, and is till today strong and healthy. From the Chinese viewpoint, Iran is a key player in the West Asia region. Additionally, Iran is also the second largest country in the region area wise. Thus, Iran is in a position to help China increase its influence in the Persian Gulf and beyond.<sup>iv</sup>

### IRAN-CHINA POLITICAL RELATIONS AFTER THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran ushered a fundamental shift in Iran's foreign policy; ending the pre-revolutionary pro-West policy, Iran adopted a revolutionary outlook in its foreign policy based on what came to be known as "Neither East, Nor West" motto. The new outlook, while maintaining distance with the Western and pro-Western countries, favoured expanding relations with revolutionary, non-aligned, and Third World countries including China.<sup>v</sup> Both countries, Iran and China wanted to stop or at least minimise the US influence in the region.<sup>vi</sup>

The then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami paid a state visit to China from June 22-26, 2000. During the visit Khatami held talks with then Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Premier Zhu Rongji of the State Council and Chairman Li Ruihuan of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. During Khatami visit both countries Iran and China signed a Joint Communiqué. The two Presidents reviewed the relations between Iran and China after the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971 and were satisfied with the development of the friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries over the past 21 years since the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both leaders also underlined that Iran and China should maintain high-ranking official contacts within the framework of the political consultation mechanism that the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the two countries put in place on February 21, 2000. Leaders from both sides agreed that the Silk Road had laid a solid foundation for cultural exchanges between the ancient civilisations of China and Iran. The revival of the Silk Road would contribute significantly to the consolidation and development of the cultural, art, tourist and people-to-people contacts. Both sides also agreed for the legitimate rights of any country for peaceful uses of nuclear energy,

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chemical and biological technology in a transparent manner under the supervision of international organisations or agencies. The two leaders also said that peace in the West Asia region cannot be achieved without recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people, including the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. The security and stability of the Persian Gulf should be maintained by the countries in the region free from outside interference.<sup>vii</sup>

On January 7, 2001, then Vice President of China, Hu Jintao visited Iran and met with Iranian leaders including then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Hu underlined that bilateral economic and trade cooperation between China and Iran had increased in recent years. He also underlined that the Joint Economic and Trade Commission had played a significant role in deepening the bilateral economic and trade cooperation. On dialogue among civilisations, a topic initiated by Khatami, Hu said it conduces to the development of mutual understanding, cementing of friendship and cooperation among people and to the realization of the common aspirations of all the people in the world seeking peace and development. He said that China strongly endorsed this initiative, as according to China, the diversity of the world civilisations should be recognised, and dialogues and exchanges between them should be encouraged; different civilizations should learn from each other in a bid to seek common progress and development of mankind.<sup>viii</sup>

On April 20, 2002, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Iran and held talks with then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in Tehran. They had an in-depth exchange of views on Sino-Iranian relations as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest. Both leaders expressed satisfaction on growing China-Iran relations, and reiterated their commitment to maintaining regional as well as international peace and stability, and resistance to any form of hegemony. Jiang said both China and Iran could also cooperate to maintain regional and international peace and stability. Jiang also added that China is against any form of hegemony or terrorism so as to maintain the world peace and to promote the common development. All countries, big or small, strong or weak, are equal members of the international community, and global issues should be peacefully resolved through negotiation instead of military means or threatening to use force. Iran also hoped to further expand the mutually beneficial cooperation with China and welcomed Chinese enterprises to invest in and set up plants in Iran. Both leaders also discussed other issues of common interest. After the talks, Iran and China signed six documents on oil and gas cooperation, on avoidance of double taxation, on post, telecommunications and information technology cooperation, on maritime transportation, on the implementation of plans for 2003-2005 cultural exchanges, and on the establishment of a joint business council.<sup>ix</sup>

On November 6, 2004, then Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing went to Tehran and discussed various issues of mutual interest with his Iranian counterpart Seyed Kamal Kharrazi, Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami, and Iran's Supreme National Security Council Chief, Hassan Rouhani. At the joint press conference, foreign ministers from both sides expressed satisfaction with the China-Iran relations and the friendly and reciprocal cooperation between the two countries in areas such as politics, economy, trade, and culture.<sup>x</sup>

On January 5, 2007, Special Envoy of Iranian Supreme Leader and Secretary of Iran Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani met with Chinese President Hu Jintao in China. President Hu Jintao said that since the establishment of diplomatic ties between Iran and China, bilateral relations have been developing smoothly with the growing high-level exchanges between the two countries. Hu said that developing China-Iran ties for long-term stability, mutually beneficial cooperation and common development based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence has been Chinese Government's set policy.<sup>xi</sup>

On September 6, 2008, then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad met with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao in China. The Chinese president thanked the Iranian Government and people for their assistance in the aftermath of the May 12 Sichuan earthquake. He added that the Chinese Government values its traditional friendship with Iran and is ready to work with the Iranian side to push forward bilateral relations on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit. He noted that both countries could enhance political exchanges, strengthen the traditional friendship and maintain communication and

contacts. He also added that both sides should also work together to enhance cooperation on regional and international forums on various issues for mutual interest and for maintain regional and global peace and stability.<sup>xii</sup>

In 2011, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of China-Iran diplomatic ties, then Iranian Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi travelled to Beijing and met with his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi. Both sides exchanged views on international and regional issues of common concern including the Iranian nuclear issue and the situation in West Asia and North Africa.<sup>xiii</sup> On September 11, 2012, Wu Bangguo, then chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) visited Iran and discussed various issues of mutual interest with then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Wu said that China followed the path of peaceful development, pursued an independent foreign policy of peace and was ready to develop friendly and cooperative relations with all countries including Iran. On bilateral relations, Wu said that developing the Sino-Iranian friendly and cooperative ties is not only in accordance with the fundamental benefits of the two countries and their peoples, but also conducive to regional peace, stability and prosperity. While maintaining high-level exchanges, both sides should also strengthen the friendly exchanges between the governments, parliaments and localities and keep close communication and cooperation in the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other multilateral organisations.<sup>xiv</sup>

Iran's *Majlis* speaker, Ali Larijani visited China on October 30, 2013, and held talks with China's NPC Chairman, Zhang Dejiang. Zhang stressed that in recent years, China-Iran relations have maintained an impetus of positive and stable development and are now at a significant stage connecting the past to the future. Zhang Dejiang also added that exchanges between the legislative bodies are an important part of China-Iran relations and have played a unique role in strengthening the cooperation and understanding between peoples-to-people contact between the two countries and enhancing the development of bilateral relations. Larijani reciprocated by saying that the *Majlis* was ready to work with the NPC in order to develop and promote friendly relations between the two countries in broader areas.<sup>xv</sup> Under the current situation, promoting a positive development of China-Iran relations is not only conducive to the common interest of the two countries, but will also have positive impact on peace and stability in the West Asia region. Xi Jinping also stressed that Beijing would try to play a positive role in future for peaceful solution of the Iranian nuclear issue within the P5+1 mechanism. Overall in 2013, friendly relations and cooperation between China and Iran made solid progress in all fields.

In May 21, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised the formation of a new Asian organisation for security cooperation, with the participation of Iran and Russia. The Chinese President's statement came during the address of the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai. He underlined, "We need to innovate our security cooperation (and) establish new regional security cooperation architecture."<sup>xvi</sup> Xi said that the Asian countries should react jointly on serious issues such as transnational crime, cyber security, energy security, terrorism and natural disasters. He also added, "We should have zero tolerance for terrorism, separatism and extremism and should enhance international cooperation and step up the fight against the 'three forces.'" CICA is a multinational forum to strengthen cooperation in a bid to promote peace, security and stability in Asia. The CICA has 24 countries as members. The Arab League and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are also international observer organisations. The CICA summit is organised after every four years in order to discuss and set priorities for its activities.

The meeting between the Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Shanghai on May 22, 2014 boosted the China-Iran bilateral relations anew. Both leaders jointly planned for the expansion of China-Iran relationship. The Chinese President also welcomed Iran to actively participate in the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Silk Road on the Sea of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, increasing the cooperation in infrastructure construction and other fields and start the projects such as high-speed railways and economic parks. Both leaders also discussed the need to strengthen security cooperation, and jointly combat terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational crimes. They also agreed to set up cultural centres in each other's country as early as possible and enhance cooperation in tourism. President Rouhani

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also underlined the development of the bilateral relations since he met President Jinping in Bishkek in 2013, and also welcomed the Chinese enterprises to invest in Iran.<sup>xvii</sup>

On February 15, 2015, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi held talks with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran in Teheran. Wang Yi said that as an ancient civilization and a major country in the West Asia region, it also has a unique and significant influence in international and regional affairs, particularly in the Non-Aligned Movement, and that the China-Iran relations have strategic implications beyond the bilateral scope. The Chinese Foreign Minister also emphasised on some major issues: First, enhancing political mutual trust by maintaining high-level exchanges. Second, jointly developing the "One Belt One Road". He welcomed Iran's active response to and participation in the initiative of building the "One Belt One Road", and in strengthening the cooperation of respective development strategies with Iran to encourage connectivity and realise win-win cooperation based on the principles of consultation, co-construction and sharing. Third, enhancing cooperation in traditional drives and setting up a model of cooperation among the up, middle and down streams of energy, so as to bring forth an orderly, sound and stable growth. Fourth, focussing on industrial cooperation. On the basis of Iran's growth requirements and China's capability, Beijing was willing to encourage more Chinese enterprises to invest and set up factories in Iran through jointly building industrial parks and other forms to support improve Iran's industrialisation level. Fifth, enhancing bilateral interactions and cooperation in fields such as counter-terrorism, drug control and combating transnational crimes. Sixth, promoting bilateral cooperation in several fields such as culture, education, science, technology and tourism to enhance understanding and carry forward friendly relationship. Seventh, maintaining communication and coordination in international and regional affairs to protect the common interests of the developing countries.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that China is an extremely reliable partner, and Iran is willing to upgrade its bilateral relations with China to a higher level and to strengthen its relations especially in fields such as energy, connectivity, railways, ports, science, technology and people-to-people and cultural engagement. Zarif also appreciated the positive and constructive role that China has played in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue and hoped that China will again play a constructive role in final nuclear deal.<sup>xix</sup>

The Iranian scholar, Mohsen Shariatinia, has articulated that the foreign policy of China, which began in 2012 and will possibly linger up to 2022, during which the fifth generation of the country's leaders would be in power, is ostensibly undergoing a strategic U-turn. Mohsen Shariatinia believes that China's recent approach has been practical and a departure from its silent and passive diplomacy in the past, a new foreign policy approach that is proactive and based on new and open initiatives.<sup>xx</sup> Clearly, Iran's position today as a strategically important player in the region, especially from the geopolitical and geo-economic point of view, is now also being recognised by the superpowers including China.

The Western sanctions imposed on Iran have provided China the ideal opportunity to further its various interests in the West Asia region, through its expansion of ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. China also wants to cooperate with Iran on present crisis in the West Asia region in general and Syria in particular. China also seeks cooperation with Iran on domestic disturbances, especially in the Xinjiang region. At the same time, China is also trying to stop Iran's increasing influence in the international arena from having a possible negative impact on its own interests.<sup>xxi</sup>

Iran too seeks to benefit from the strengthening of relations with China in various sectors. However, investments made by China in Iran had become tricky, including the export of Chinese goods to Iran. Obviously, Iran was under strong pressure from international agencies such as the UNSC and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) due to its nuclear programme, and the international sanctions. Nevertheless, Iranian scholars like Mohsen Shariatinia pointed out,

In order to normalise Iran relations with China in a way that would protect the national interests in the best way, Tehran requires to build direct mutual understanding based on Iran's interests of China's politics and economy. Iran also needs to national consensus and a powerful bureaucratic system to deal with this country in the future.<sup>xxii</sup>

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On April 23, 2015, the Chinese President Xi Jinping met with his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani in Jakarta. During discussions both leaders shares their views on mutual interest. Xi Jinping underlined that the bilateral relations are now reaching a significant phase that would determine its future course. He stressed that the two nations should maintain high-level contacts and exchanges in all fields, strengthen strategic mutual trust, and increase bilateral and mutually favourable cooperation in several areas with emphasis on the construction of Belt and Road and on the basis of connectivity and industrial cooperation. Further, China seeks long-term cooperation with Iran in the energy sector, and also seeks to develop cooperation in fields such as high-speed rail, highways, construction materials, light textile, telecommunications, electric power and engineering machinery, so as to connect advantageous industries, high-quality resources and sound markets of the two countries.<sup>xxiii</sup>

On June 4, 2015, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi also expressed satisfaction with the development of bilateral relations between Tehran and Beijing in recent years, saying that his country was willing to establish strategic relations with Iran. Wang also discussed about a Chinese plan to revive the Silk Road – a project that aims to connect Asia to Europe and Africa through a network of roads, railways, ports and airports. Wang said that the project could create new opportunities for industrial and financial cooperation between China and Iran, and serve the interests of both the Asian nations.<sup>xxiv</sup>

On July 9, 2015, the Chinese President Xi Jinping met with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani and said that Beijing was willing to expand “strategic” ties with Iran. Both leaders met on the side-lines of the joint summits of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the Russian city of Ufa. The Iranian President called for expansion of economic cooperation between the two countries and praised China’s role in the nuclear talks.<sup>xxv</sup> The nuclear deal, on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the P5+1, again enhanced political, economic and trade relations between Iran and China. Lifting of economic sanctions against Iran again improved their bilateral relations. Immediately after the announcement of lifting of economic sanctions on Iran, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Iran on January 23, 2016 and he became the first head of state visiting Iran since sanctions were lifted. Upon arrival in Tehran, he said for open of new chapter in bilateral relations including political one, between Iran and China has resulted in important achievements in the political, economic and cultural sectors. During his visit to Iran, both countries signed 17 documents for cooperation in various fields including economic, industrial, cultural and judicial. Visiting president, Xi said “In cooperation with the Iranian side and by benefiting from the current favourable conditions, China is ready to upgrade the level of bilateral relations and cooperation so that a new chapter will start in bilateral relations in the long term.”<sup>xxvi</sup> However, one thing clear here that after lifting of sanctions on Iran, the Islamic Republic is once again emerge as an economic hub and will be more open for global market or business. So, China would also face more competition than in the past, because many international firms are also show willingness to invest in Iran and resume trade with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian President Rouhani also underlined that Iran welcomes stronger ties with China especially after the removal of international sanctions on Islamic Republic. Both leaders also discussed about prospects of cooperation especially on “creating stability and security in the West Asia region and helping countries affected by terrorism, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and providing intellectual and intelligence assistance in the fight on terrorism.”<sup>xxvii</sup> China played significant role in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). On December 5, 2016, during a joint press conference in Beijing, where foreign ministers from both sides participated, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China would not back off from the nuclear deal between Iran and P five plus one.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As the United States grapples with the economic crisis, the consequences of two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a swiftly changing global scenario, it tries to find the way to exert its influence at the global level. China, which is on a constant search for raw materials and energy resources to drive its extraordinary economic growth and the search for new markets for its products, appears to be the main beneficiary in the

region. It could be argued, that the respective geopolitical situations of both Iran and China, as well as their particular requirements, capabilities, and constraints have encouraged them to seek closer collaboration in various sectors including political, energy, trade and economic and defence. Considering China's expected rising demand for energy and the continuation of Iran's political difficulties with the Western world especially with the US for the foreseeable future, it can be reasonably expected that Iran-China cooperation in various sectors will continue to remain an important factor in their bilateral relations.

The Iranian emphasis during the past several years has been on expansion of relations with China, including political relations and exchange of high-level visits from both sides. This means Iran wants to build not just cordial relations with China but also enhance their strategic relationship. China has always opposed US unilateral sanctions against Iran because strong sanctions would have affected Beijing's overall trade relations, including the energy supply from Tehran. However, China is very tricky especially on a sensitive issue including Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. Chinese officials maintained that Beijing supported Iran's nuclear programme for peaceful purposes, but the same time they opposed Iran's alleged development of nuclear arsenal.

On the nuclear issue, China has consistently followed a middle-of-the-road approach and adopted quite moderate positions. On the one hand, they have supported, in principle, Iran's right under the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to enjoy nuclear energy capability for peaceful purposes and have emphasised on the imperative of diplomacy and negotiation to resolve the ongoing standoff. While, on the other hand, China has joined the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in adopting sanction resolutions against Iran. Even a comparison between the respective behaviour of Russia and China towards the four Council resolutions passed since 2006 in this regard clearly shows a more cautious approach on the part of China.

## END NOTES

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