

Iranian Foreign Policy Strategy Regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global infrastructure development project initiated by China, aimed at building roads, railways, and maritime trade routes connecting Asia to Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. A key country in this project is the Islamic Republic of Iran, which holds a strategic geographical position linking the BRI's Southern Corridor—also known as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor—connecting Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkan countries. Given this strategic role, Iran's foreign policy approach toward the BRI is critical to understanding its regional and global positioning. This article examines Iran's foreign policy strategy concerning China's BRI using Lovell's typology of foreign policy strategies (1970). Through a qualitative research approach, the findings indicate that Iran employs a concordance strategy in its foreign policy, leveraging its position to maximize benefits while managing geopolitical risks. Iran's approach involves exploiting tactical advantages, minimizing potential losses, enhancing its bargaining position, and strengthening deterrence against external pressures. Additionally, Iran utilizes tactical strategies, including "declarations and commitments, promises and threats," as well as "demonstrations of capability," to assert its influence in regional and global politics. These strategies reflect Iran's broader efforts to navigate its complex geopolitical environment while capitalizing on the economic and strategic opportunities presented by China's BRI.

INTRODUCTION

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a global infrastructure development project initiated by China in the form of building roads and railways connecting Asia to Europe; also, the Indo-Pacific port route starts from Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East (or West Asia) and Africa (Osiewicz, 2018; Tas Yetim & Hazar, 2024). China's BRI is supported by the development of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and sustainable lending policies to support BRI projects, especially infrastructure development in countries that will be part of the BRI pathway. China has prepared approximately USD 160 billion in loan funds for matters related to infrastructure development (Wan, 2016)

One of the countries targeted by China's BRI project is Iran, which signed and agreed to the BRI Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2016 (Ekhtiari & Salehi, 2018; The New York Times, 2021). This signing occurred during a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Tehran in 2016. During this meeting, trade relations between China and Iran were also discussed, and China agreed to increase bilateral trade between the two countries to USD 600 billion by 2026 (Green & Roth, 2021). The two countries agreed to cooperate in five priority areas, namely policy coordination, facility connectivity, free trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (Ibold, 2018; Cong, 2024). The agreement between China and Iran has strengthened relations between the two countries, especially since China and Iran agreed on the China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two countries on March 27 2021, regarding cooperation in various fields, including energy, security, infrastructure and communications (Dudgeon, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has thus emerged as a crucial instrument for Iran and China to enhance their economic and geopolitical presence in the Middle East. Conversely, Iran's strategic location renders it indispensable to the BRI, serving as a vital nexus connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. This pivotal role positions Iran at the intersection of both the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). This coincides with Iran's recent 2023 membership in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). According to *Tasnim*, a prominent Iranian newspaper dated Friday, 21 June 2024, "Observers and analysts believe that Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has effectively facilitated its position within China's grand initiative known as the 'Belt and Road,' and has strengthened Iran's ties with Central Asian governments, which carries significant economic benefits for Iran." Analysts contend that Iran's inclusion in the SCO has effectively enhanced its positioning within China's grand initiative, strengthening its ties with Central Asian governments and presenting substantial economic advantages.

Given this strategic positioning, Iran is well-positioned to emerge as a long-term transit hub within the evolving geopolitical landscape (Belal, 2020; Kamel, 2018). China's geopolitical ambitions are driving the establishment of trade routes that connect Central Asia to Iran, culminating in the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Southern Corridor, also known as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. This corridor not only facilitates connections between China, Iran, and Central Asia but also extends Chinese influence into Turkey and the Balkan countries (Garlick & Havlová, 2020; Tas Yetim & Hazar, 2024).

Both China and Iran share a common strategic objective: to undermine the hegemony of the United States in critical regions, including the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. This alignment suggests that an increasing Chinese presence in the Middle East may significantly reduce the U.S. footprint in the region (Osiewicz, 2018; Gohari Moqadam et al., 2024). Furthermore, both nations' aspirations for enhanced sovereignty and autonomy are evident in their foreign policy objectives. China and Iran are actively seeking to assert their independence while bolstering their economic resilience through deepened bilateral cooperation. According to a 2016 political report prepared for the Islamic Parliament Research Center (IPRC), which included expert opinions from members of the Majlis (parliament) Speaker's Board and Standing Committees, several key arguments were made regarding the extension of Iran's relations with China. The report highlighted that:

1. The political, economic, and defense relations between Iran and China are increasingly significant.
2. China does not pose a military threat to Iran, fostering a relationship characterized by normalcy and growth.
3. China is viewed as an important economic partner, complementing Iran's economic landscape.
4. China is an independent major power with emerging influence on the global stage.
5. China engages in serious competition with the United States, which shapes its interactions with Iran.

However, challenges and limitations in Tehran-Beijing relations are also apparent. Therefore, it is essential to regard China as a long-term strategic partner rather than merely an ally. Policymakers must realistically adjust their diplomatic strategies towards China while maintaining strategic relations that encompass various political, economic, and security dimensions. This partnership underscores not only their mutual economic interests but also reflects a broader ambition to establish a multipolar world order where both countries can pursue their national objectives with minimal external interference. By cultivating this strategic collaboration, China and Iran aim to construct a framework that challenges established power dynamics and fosters a vision of regional stability aligned with their respective interests. This positioning allows them to emerge as key players in reshaping global geopolitical realities.

The strategic partnership between Iran and China not only enhances bilateral relations but also serves as a cornerstone for Iran's foreign policy, particularly in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The importance of the BRI for Iran has led to the formulation of foreign policies that actively support this project. A notable example is the Joint Statement of the Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established in 2016 (Khanmohammadi & Sun, 2022). In this agreement, the two countries outlined twenty articles that constitute a roadmap for developing and deepening relations across various domains, including political, executive, cultural, regional, and international cooperation, as well as justice, security, and defense (Qi & Wang, 2023). In the Joint Statement, Iran explicitly affirmed its acceptance and support for the BRI by promoting cooperation and investment between the two nations in several sectors such as transportation, railways, ports, energy, industry, services, and trade (Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2016). Furthermore, both countries emphasized collaboration in the maritime sector. This cooperation secures China's

strategic interests by minimizing potential disruptions to marine transportation through the Strait of Hormuz via Chabahar Port (Indeo, 2019; Watanabe, 2019). Thus, it is evident that Iran's alignment with China's BRI is not merely a matter of economic necessity but also a strategic maneuver aimed at enhancing its geopolitical standing while fostering a robust partnership with a major global power. The agreement between Iran and China presents a complex landscape of advantages and challenges that both nations must navigate. On one hand, the benefits of this partnership include significant economic assistance from China in the form of investment, consumption, and loans, which are critical for addressing Iran's pressing economic needs. Additionally, China's energy requirements align with Iran's abundant resources, while Iran's geopolitical position offers strategic advantages for China in the region. However, this partnership is not without its challenges. Iran faces regional issues, particularly concerning its relations with Saudi Arabia and India's apprehensions regarding China's growing influence (Bhboudi Njad, 2021; Khanmohammadi & Sun, 2022; Fulton, 2022; Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2023). Despite these challenges, Iran remains committed to its cooperation with China, recognizing the potential for mutual benefit. The strategic partnership is designed to enhance Iran's economic resilience while providing China with a foothold in a geopolitically significant area. As such, both countries are motivated to work through their respective challenges to capitalize on the advantages presented by their agreement. This ongoing collaboration underscores the importance of adaptability and strategic alignment in navigating the complexities of international relations in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. Iran's engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has not been extensively explored in existing literature, leaving significant gaps in understanding its foreign policy approach toward this major global initiative. While some research addresses aspects of Iran-China relations, a comprehensive analysis of Iran's strategic positioning within the BRI framework remains underdeveloped.

Several studies provide valuable insights but do not fully address this gap. For instance, Green and Roth (2021) and Syafriani & Kusuma (2018) examine Iran-China cooperation, particularly before and after their Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), emphasizing Chinese investments in Iranian projects and Iran's support for the BRI. However, these works focus on economic collaborations without delving into the broader implications of these ties for Iran's foreign policy. Similarly, Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami (2016), Haji-Yousefi (2018) and Abuzar Gohari moqadam et al. (2024) compare Iran's foreign policy under president Ahmadinejad, Rouhani and the late Ebrahim Raisi but do not specifically analyze their relationship with China in the context of the BRI. Then there are other scholars that solely focus on the Iran-China relations from the lens of strategic partnership, the 25 year agreement or else Iran's 'look to the east' and pivot to Asia as part of its foreign policy transformation, without elaborating on the importance of BRI (Ekhtiari Amiri et al., 2018; Taheri et al., 2021; Fulton, 2022; Rekabian et al., 2022; Khanmohammadi & Sun, 2022; Jafari & Falah, 2023; Gohari Moqadam et al., 2024;).

Recent studies further highlight Iran's geoeconomic and geostrategic significance within the BRI. For example, in an article by Ebrahim Taheri et al. (2021) in the *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* emphasizes China's pragmatic approach to prioritizing regional partners like Turkey and Pakistan due to international sanctions on

Iran, while still recognizing Iran's critical role in China's Eurasian strategy. Additionally, Cong Peiwu (2024) underscores the historical and strategic importance of Iran as a key partner in advancing Belt and Road connectivity, emphasizing mutual benefits in infrastructure development and economic integration. Raisi's remarks on multilateralism and regional stability also align with the BRI's objectives, framing Iran as a security-building power that complements China's vision for a more interconnected world order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024).

This article aims to address these gaps by analyzing Iran's foreign policy strategy regarding the BRI through an Islamic perspective. Employing Lovell's typology of foreign policy strategies, it examines how religious ideologies shape Iran's diplomatic engagements with China. The primary research questions guiding this study include:

1. How does Iran's Islamic ideology influence its approach to the BRI?
2. What are the implications of Iran's participation in the BRI for its regional and global standing?
3. In what ways does this cooperation reflect broader shifts in international relations?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's foreign policy within global economic initiatives like the BRI. It also enriches academic discussions by integrating perspectives from Persian and English literature on this critical topic.

METHODOLOGY

This article presents the findings of a comprehensive research effort employing qualitative methods to achieve an in-depth understanding of Iran's foreign policy in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The methodology adopted in this study consists of a rigorous literature review complemented by the analysis of both primary and secondary data pertinent to the research question. The primary data sources comprise an array of governmental reports, official documents, and cooperation agreements between Iran and China, retrieved from the official websites of both governments. Notably, this research also prioritized the examination of Persian-Iranian primary sources, including newspapers, journals, and other media outlets, to capture the diverse perspectives and discourses surrounding Iranian foreign policy. Persian-Iranian articles and studies authored by experts from various geographic and disciplinary backgrounds further enriched the analysis, providing contextually relevant insights into the domestic frameworks influencing Iran's approach to international partnerships. Secondary data encompass scholarly journal articles, books, and information from various mass media and online news platforms. The methodological techniques employed in this study include document review and semi-structured interviews, ensuring a robust triangulation of data sources. Key informants were selected purposefully from the Center for Iran-Malay World Studies, chosen for their expertise in the themes aligned with the research objectives.

To enhance the validity of the findings, the researcher triangulated the data by cross-referencing the document review results with insights gleaned from the interviews. This triangulation process not only bolstered the reliability of the research but also provided a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between Iranian and Chinese policies within the broader context of international relations. Through this rigorous

methodological framework, the study aims to contribute valuable knowledge to the discourse on geopolitical strategy and the evolving dynamics of bilateral relations in a multipolar world.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In examining foreign policy strategy, it is essential to consider the frameworks that guide decision-making processes and the tactical considerations that underpin them. J. P. Lovell's Foreign Policy Strategy provides a comprehensive perspective on these dynamics.

J. P. Lovell's Foreign Policy Strategy

Foreign policy strategy is a perspective that focuses on broad patterns of continuity and change in foreign policy, as explained in strategic provisions for policy formation. Foreign policy strategy also has an analytical focus on a decision or series of decisions described in terms of tactical considerations (Lovell, 1970, p. 57). Foreign policy strategy includes at least two things: tactical objectives and techniques.

1. Tactical Objective

There are five tactical objectives as follows.

1. *Legitimacy*: recognising policy makers' decisions to justify their actions within the internal sphere, allies, and foreign clients. Legitimacy includes actions performed previously or actions anticipated in the future (Lovell, 1970, p. 76).
2. *Exploitation of Tactical Advantage*: a decision maker with a tactical advantage can win the situation if he successfully exploits his advantage. Moreover, victory can be achieved if the momentum and policies are correct. However, a country with a tactical advantage may only win the situation if policymakers can formulate policies that can exploit their advantages and hinder the next steps their opponents will take. (Lovell, 1970, pp. 76–77).
3. *Reduction of Tactical Disadvantage*: a technical objective to reduce a country's significant losses in a contest. One way to mitigate tactical losses is to catch up with the competition. So that if the worst scenario occurs, the country will not suffer too much loss compared to its rival countries. (Lovell, 1970, pp. 77–78)
4. *Improvement of Bargaining Position*: with a higher bargaining position, the possibility for a country to get its interests and what it needs is more significant than before (Lovell, 1970, p. 78).
5. *Strengthening Deterrence*: in order to carry out successful deterrence, a country must have credibility in its capabilities and carry out the threats that constitute deterrence. Tactical actions taken to strengthen deterrence can be simple (such as sending a marine battalion to an area) or complex (such as signing a multiparty alliance agreement); activities that are light (such as sending a diplomatic note containing a warning) or heavy (such as threatening to use military force). (Lovell, 1970, pp. 78–79).

2. Tactical Techniques

There are five tactical techniques, namely, declarations and Commitments, Promises and Threats, Demonstration of Capabilities, Deception and bluffing, and Rewards and Punishment (Lovell, 1970). After identifying tactical objectives and techniques, we can determine the type of a country's foreign policy's strategy. There are four types of foreign policy strategies. **Leadership strategy** is a strategy taken by a country if that country is superior to other countries with the same interests. **Concordance strategy** is a strategy taken by a country that is inferior to one with the same interests. **Confrontation strategy** is a strategy a country takes to increase conflict with its opposing country. **Accommodation strategy** is carried out by countries that are inferior to their rival countries to avoid conflict (Lovell, 1970, p. 130).

Understanding these frameworks not only clarifies how nations navigate their foreign relations but also provides insights into their strategic choices in an increasingly complex global landscape. The application of Lovell's typology serves as a valuable tool for analyzing contemporary foreign policy strategies within various geopolitical contexts.

Iran's Foreign Policy Direction and Its Strategic Positions in The Belt and Road Initiative

In the context of global geopolitical dynamics, Iran's foreign policy direction reflects its strategic interests and ideological commitments, particularly concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This section explores how Iran integrates its Islamic values into its foreign policy framework, shaping its interactions with key partners like China.

Foreign Policy of Iran

Iran leverages its historical and cultural identity, which enables religion to play a significant role in shaping its foreign policy approaches. At the core of this strategy is a commitment to the principle of justice, which serves as a contextual foundation for integrating religious values into its foreign policy framework (Wastnidge, 2020). Specifically, the basic directives of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy are enshrined in Chapter Ten of the country's Constitution, two of the four articles of which are as follows.

Article 152: The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with non-aggressive states.

Article 153: Any form of agreement that would result in foreign domination over the natural and economic resources, foreign domination over culture, the army, and other affairs of the country, is forbidden.

From these two articles, it is evident that a fundamental pillar of Iran's foreign policy is its commitment to maintaining sovereignty and independence. In practice, Iran aims to build strategic alliances with other nations, provided that such partnerships do not compromise its autonomy. In Islamic discourse, this principle aligns with the concept

of *istiqlal* (self-reliance), which resonates with Iran's stance against external domination. This approach is deeply rooted in the Islamic directive to resist submission to foreign powers while upholding *izzah* (dignity) (QS Al-Munafiqun: 8).

In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite the ideological differences between China's communist framework and Iran's Islamic governance, both nations are driven by mutual interests. Their partnership is shaped by the complex and dynamic nature of their bilateral relations, influenced largely by Western political pressures and shared economic needs. Both Iran and China view the U.S. presence in Asia as a strategic threat to their national security (Taheri et al., 2022).

A core theme of Iran's foreign policy is its advocacy for the oppressed and pursuit of justice—an enduring principle across successive administrations. This objective is enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution. For example, Article 3.16 states that Iran's foreign policy must be "...formulated based on Islamic principles, a commitment to solidarity with all Muslims, and unwavering support for oppressed peoples worldwide" (Wastnidge, 2020).

Furthermore, the Quran emphasizes fairness and accountability in agreements (QS Al-Maidah: 1) and upholds the principle of honoring commitments (*wafa' bil-'ahd*). Iran's formal support for the BRI reflects its adherence to this principle, reinforcing its dedication to maintaining fair and transparent partnerships.

Strategic Positions in The Belt and Road Initiative

Iran's strategic position in the Belt and Road Initiative is its geographical position in transportation modes in the form of road routes, sea routes through ports, and train routes. Iran also has strategic land borders and coastlines. Iran's geographical position connects the Middle East, Central, and South Asia. Iran borders directly with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Iraq. This position makes Iran a key node (hub) of the Silk Road project that stretches through northern Iran and has primary access to the high seas (Joharchi, 2016; Khanmohammadi & Sun, 2022; Nazarzadeh et al., 2024). This position in BRI is very profitable because it can stimulate intraregional trade and investment between Iran and neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Oman. Iran and Iraq have built a railway line connecting Shalamchek in Iran and Basra in Iraq. In the future, this train will connect Iran with the Eastern Mediterranean countries and play an essential role in promoting trade and facilitating transportation between the two countries, strengthening Iran's position as a transit center (Kamel, 2018).

Iran in the BRI is part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), which will connect China with the Arabian Peninsula. This corridor starts from Xinjiang, China and then crosses Central Asia before reaching the Persian Gulf, Mediterranean Sea and Arabian Peninsula. This corridor passes through five countries in Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan and seventeen countries in West Asia including Iran (China State Council Information Office, 2020). Later, in CCWAEC, a road will be built across the Central Asia Corridor countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This road will end in Iran, followed by the Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

Iran has a significant role in the Central Asia Corridor because these five countries do not have territorial waters. If BRI is realized, this will be a significant

advantage in these countries' distribution and logistics sectors. There is even a possibility that BRI will use Jask Port on its route, located in the northern part of the Strait of Hormuz, close to Iraq. In the future, Jask Port will be used as an extension of Chabahar Port (Belal, 2020). Iran and China have discussed using Jask Port access because China supports Iran's ambition to establish an Iranian oil export terminal in Jask for USD 1.8 billion to increase Iran's oil exports (Indeo, 2019).

Several ports in Iran are vital in the global energy transportation system. If this point is disturbed, it will affect energy prices, supplies, and global trade flows. Iran's port, located in the Strait of Hormuz, is vital in global energy transportation, where twenty per cent of the world's oil ships sail through the Strait. With this position, China already has three ports in the Strait of Hormuz: Bandar Abbas Port, Jask Port, and Chabahar Port. Therefore, the Strait of Hormuz is considered the world's most critical energy transportation point (Kamel, 2018).

The primary function of Chabahar Port is to connect the Indian Ocean with transportation hubs in Afghanistan and former Soviet countries in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan (Osiewicz, 2018). Considering the strategic location of Chabahar Port, Uzbekistan proposed building a logistics centre at the port (Boltuc, 2022). Not only Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is also interested in using the high capacity and potential of Chabahar Port in the Persian Gulf (Rocca, 2019). Apart from Chabahar Port, China also uses the Port in Bandar Abbas to increase Chinese investment in the Gulf of Oman (Boltuc, 2022). Besides road routes and ports, Iran's other strategic position is the railway route. Iran has strategic potential to connect the trans-Caspian transit route (passing through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine) to Europe (Osiewicz, 2018; Tas Yetim & Hazar, 2024). This railway line connects Central and West Asia and can even go further to southern and northern Europe.

Besides transportation, Iran's significance in the BRI is its economic aspects. Iran's natural resources are about seven per cent of the world's natural reserves, with eleven per cent of the world's oil reserves and sixteen per cent of the world's natural gas resources. This figure is equivalent to 133 billion barrels of oil and 27 trillion cubic meters of gas, with a total of USD 4,000 billion based on oil and gas prices in 2020 (Belal, 2020). These two commodities contribute energy power to Iran in the BRI scheme. Iran's energy strength in cooperation with China is very useful for China's energy security. With Iran's energy capabilities, China has the energy diversification needed to meet the country's energy security. Therefore, China made Iran a strategic partner.

Tactical Goals of Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Regarding The Belt And Road Initiative

Legitimacy

Iran's legitimacy regarding BRI is contained in the Joint Statement of Iran-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership regarding cooperation between the two countries in 2016. In the Joint Statement issued by the President of Iran, article seven states that Iran openly supports BRI and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2016).

“The Iranian side welcomes “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiative introduced by China. Relying on their respective

strengths and advantages as well as the opportunities provided through the signing of documents such as the “MOU on Jointly Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and “MOU on Reinforcement of Industrial and Mineral Capacities and Investment”, both sides shall expand cooperation and mutual investments in various areas including transportation, railway, ports, energy, industry, commerce and services”

The Iranian Parliament, President Hassan Rouhani, and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have approved Iran's legitimacy in joining the BRI project. Iran's parliament, mainly filled with conservatives, supported and agreed for Iran to cooperate with China and implement the proposed agreement (Belal, 2020). As Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei referred to BRI as a wise idea and accepted cooperation between the two countries within the BRI framework. Hassan Rouhani, as President of Iran at that time, often voiced the need for cooperation between Iran and China in this project (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017).

Exploit Tactical Advantage

Iran has a tactical advantage over China. One of Iran's tactical advantages is in natural resources, where Iran has oil and natural gas reserves totalling seven per cent of the world's natural reserves (Belal, 2020). Iran exploits its tactical advantage by utilizing its energy reserves to help diversify the energy China needs for its energy security (Damhuri, 2021; Nazarzadeh et al., 2024). Iran exploits its advantage in energy reserves to encourage China to help Iran's economy. Iran provides discounts on oil and natural gas prices to China. China's purchase of Iranian natural gas and petroleum helps Iran to meet its country's needs.

Cooperation between Iran and China helps Iran, which is having difficulty regulating oil exports due to sanctions, to obtain guarantees for oil sales and energy infrastructure development from China (Damhuri, 2021). Approximately one-third of Iran's oil production was exported to China in 2017 (Garlick & Havlová, 2020a). Even during the economic embargo imposed by the United States, China remained Iran's top trading partner in both imports and exports. Although it did not cause rapid economic growth, China greatly helped Iran by becoming a major consumer of Iranian crude oil. Chinese consumption is the key to the survival of Iran's economy because these exports boost Iran's economy and provide foreign exchange for Iran's essential imports (Greer & Batmanghelidj, 2020; Lim, 2021; Osiewicz, 2018).

Iran has successfully exploited Iran's strategic geographical position. By agreeing to the Belt and Road Initiative, Iran can become a commercial transit center in its region. (Indeo, 2019). Infrastructure such as ports, railways and new highways was constructed to open Iran's access to neighbouring countries. Iran can help neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. (Damhuri, 2021; Tas Yetim & Hazar, 2024). Through BRI, Iran has the opportunity to improve Iran's position in the global economy, expand Iran's influence in the international world, and build relations with China as a country with great power in international politics. With this, Iran's position in international politics has increased compared to before (Shariatinia & Azizi, 2017; Nazarzadeh et., al, 2024).

Iran's increasing role in the international world can be seen in the Central Asia Corridor, which is a new region consisting of five countries from the former Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), Iran and China. In this region, Iran's role with its geographical position is the most easily accessible coastal terminal for the long landlocked corridor of five former Soviet Union countries from Xinjiang, China. Industrial activities in Xinjiang are then distributed to Iran to continue on the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). This regional problem equation is solved by BRI, where these countries need infrastructure connectivity for industrial and economic development (Rocca, 2019; Taheri et al., 2021; Cong, 2024).

Tactical Loss Reduction

Iran is still under a unilateral economic embargo from the United States, and one way out of this detrimental condition is collaborating with a country that has economic power that can rival the United States. From this perspective, Iran is reducing its 'tactical loss' by cooperating with China in the BRI project. Cooperation between Iran and China puts pressure on the United States. The United States imposed economic sanctions with the aim of making Iran want to carry out negotiations regarding Iranian nuclear power. The United States has two options in nuclear negotiations with Iran, namely returning Iran's nuclear status quo or including a follow-up agreement regarding nuclear, ballistic missiles and Iran's military activities in the region into the Iran nuclear deal. Under current conditions, the possibility of Iran making concessions to the United States is very small because the agreement between Iran and China softens the United States' economic sanctions against Iran. Furthermore, the agreement between China and Iran will strengthen Iran's negotiating position with the West (Damhuri, 2021; Green & Roth, 2021).

Increasing Bargaining Position

Iran's foreign policy's tactical goal is improving its trade position. By joining the BRI project, Iran seeks to improve its position in the oil and gas trade vis-à-vis China and other regional oil and gas producers. Currently, China is Iran's leading trading partner. However, Iran is not yet China's leading oil exporter because Saudi Arabia is currently the largest oil exporter to China. Besides that, several other Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, are essential partners for China in oil supplies. (Aluf, 2021). Rouhani expressed Iran's desire to improve its trade position in his conversation with Xi Jinping. Rouhani hoped that bilateral relations and cooperation between Iran and China would improve in all fields (Erina, 2021; Tehran Times, 2021). By becoming a transit and intersection center for BRI and MSR, Iran can improve its economic posture and escape the negative impacts of the economic embargo implemented by the US. Iran's political position in the region and the world will also increase.

Strengthening Deterrence

China has helped Iran to face US sanctions by becoming a major consumer of Iranian crude oil. Chinese consumption is the key to the survival of Iran's economy because these exports boost Iran's economy and provide foreign exchange for Iran's necessary imports (Gree r & Batmanghelidj, 2020; Lim, 2021; Osiewicz, 2018; Ministry

of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024). However, Iran's dependence on China also threatens Iran because dependency is inferior and can be a source of a country's lack of independence. Iran has put strict regulations on oil and natural gas prices as the owner of these resources, which could deter Iran if China does not comply with the agreement it has agreed to. China also depends on Iranian oil and natural gas to diversify and meet its country's energy needs. If China acts outside the agreement, Iran could stop distribution and cancel oil and natural gas price cuts for China.

Tactical Techniques of Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative

Iran uses several tactical techniques, including Iran's declaration and commitment to the BRI project. It can be seen from the signing of two cooperation documents with China. In 2016, Iran and China signed the Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and the Joint Statement of China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership simultaneously. The two documents were signed in Tehran when Xi Jinping visited Iran. The BRI MoU was submitted to Iran by China with the aim of inviting Iran to join the project.

In the BRI MoU, Iran and China agreed to increase cooperation in the field, the two countries agreed to cooperate on five cooperative priorities, namely policy coordination, facility connectivity, free trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (Ibold, 2018). The Joint Statement between Iran and China was signed with the aim of improving bilateral relations between Iran and China. There are twenty articles that specifically discuss the pillars of developing and deepening relations between Tehran and Beijing in five domains, namely: (1) political domain, (2) executive cooperation, (3) people and culture, (4) justice, security, and defence, and (5) regional and international. In this Joint Statement, Iran declared its commitment to Article Seven, where Iran openly supports China's BRI project initiative.

With the formation of this collaboration, promises and threats emerged. The signing of this document is a form of promise from China and Iran to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in various fields. This promise is stated in Article One of the Joint Statement of Iran and China:

"Both sides believe that under the current conditions of deepening multilateralization of the international order and globalization of the economy, the bilateral ties between Iran and China have gained strategic importance and the two sides regard each other as important strategic partners and thus designate the expansion of bilateral relations as a priority of their respective foreign policies. Appropriate and constant expansion of bilateral ties conforms to the common interests of both countries and contributes to safeguarding the regional and global peace, stability and development"

The two countries promised to cooperate in various aspects, including fields and security. With this, the two countries have agreed to work together and help each other in the economy, energy, infrastructure, communications, military, security and international politics (Mehdi, 2021; Motamedi, 2022; Jafari & Falah, 2023). The formation of this strategic cooperation also poses a threat, namely, raising the threat of

additional pressure from the US on Iran and China. The reason is that for the United States, economic assistance provided by China leads to the failure of the United States' policy in putting pressure on Iran (Damhuri, 2021; Green & Roth, 2021; Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2023).

Iran also uses demonstrations of capability in its tactical techniques. Among other things, Iran conducted a BRI experiment by opening a train line from Zhejiang - Tehran carrying 32 containers. The train route experiment with a journey duration of fourteen days, which is thirty days faster than the maritime journey from the Port of Shanghai to the Port of Bandar Abbas in Iran, shows that Iran can realize this BRI project on the transportation of goods from Zhejiang to Tehran, Iran. Meanwhile, in the good relations between Iran and China, Iran does not use bluffing and reward and punishment tactics.

Iran's Foreign Policy Concordance Strategy Regarding The Belt And Road Initiative

Based on the analysis of Iran's strategy, the author concludes that Iran's foreign policy regarding China's BRI is a **concordance strategy**. *Concordance strategy* is a strategy taken by a country that is inferior to one with the same interests. Country B, which takes this strategy, tries to maintain good relations with Country A. To maintain good relations, Country B follows Country A's policy preferences and helps or supports Country A's initiatives. Usually, the strategy taken by Country B is consulted and follows Country A's strategy (Lovell, 1970, p. 130).

Below is the explanation of this model.

1. **Hypothesis 1a:** Country B believes that country A's strategy supports country B's interests
2. (Iran believes that BRI supports Iran's interests, namely expanding Iran's influence in the international world)
3. **Hypothesis 2a:** Country B will maintain harmonious relations with Country A by following Country A's policy preferences
4. (Iran maintains harmonious relations with China by following the agreements given by China, such as signing the BRI MoU and becoming China's strategic partner, as well as carrying out cooperation for the next 25 years)

Iran maintains harmonious relations with China by strengthening digital diplomacy and accommodating China's public diplomacy. The Iranian embassy in China carries out digital diplomacy using Chinese social media platforms such as public WeChat accounts, Sina Microblog accounts, and the Douyin platform. The content created is content for the Chinese community, such as bilateral relations between Iran and China, support and endorsement of Chinese government policies on sensitive issues criticized by the international community, debatable political issues and social phenomena, current topics, and festivals in China. The Iranian Embassy to China also actively participates in discussions on public diplomacy content or interacts with the Chinese public outside of that content. The Iranian Foreign Embassy to China aims to strengthen relations between Iran and China, both government and public (Wang & Yellinek, 2022).

Iran actively accommodates China's public diplomacy initiatives, which are structured around four key pillars: Confucius Institutes, student exchanges, international

broadcasting by state-affiliated media, and tourism. These efforts reflect the deepening cultural and educational ties between the two nations. Iran hosts two Chinese-run Confucius Institutes, inaugurated in 2009 at the University of Tehran and in 2019 at the University of Mazandaran, which promote Mandarin language and Chinese culture (Qi & Wang, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, January 12, 2009). As of 2024, four Iranian universities offer Chinese language majors, underscoring the growing academic interest in China. Furthermore, the Faculty of World Studies at the University of Tehran launched its MA program in China Studies during its second term in 2024. This interdisciplinary program, taught in both Mandarin and Persian, is part of the Department of South, East Asia, and Oceanian Studies. In the tourism sector, bilateral exchanges have also expanded. The Iranian government in 2023 reported that there was an increase in Chinese tourist visits to Iran thanks to the Chinese government's initiative to place Iran on the list of top tourist destinations (Tehran Times, 2023). Additionally, China's state-affiliated media have established a presence in Iran to disseminate Beijing's perspectives on global affairs and showcase China's technological and business advancements. Notably, the CRI Persian Facebook page has gained significant traction with over 440,000 likes, making it one of China's most successful Persian-language public diplomacy initiatives (Pargoo, 2018). Student exchanges further solidify these ties. Currently, approximately 1,400 Iranian students are enrolled in educational programs in China. While there are Chinese students studying in Iran as well, their numbers remain relatively modest compared to other international students (Pargoo, 2018). These exchanges reflect a strategic effort to foster mutual understanding and collaboration between future generations of leaders from both countries. Through these multifaceted initiatives—spanning education, media outreach, tourism, and student exchanges—China has sought to strengthen its soft power influence in Iran. However, challenges remain in fully engaging Iranian society and addressing public skepticism about China's intentions. As both nations continue to deepen their strategic partnership within frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), public diplomacy will play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and fostering long-term cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Iran's alignment with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a well-calibrated foreign policy strategy that melds geopolitical imperatives with economic necessities. Positioned at the intersection of key corridors within the BRI framework, Iran leverages its geographical centrality and abundant natural resources to assert itself as a vital node in global connectivity. By applying J.P. Lovell's typology of foreign policy strategies, this study elucidates Iran's adoption of a concordance strategy, characterized by tactical objectives such as exploiting strategic advantages, mitigating tactical losses, enhancing its bargaining power, and bolstering deterrence. These efforts collectively underscore Iran's calculated approach to fostering cooperation while minimizing vulnerabilities in its engagement with China. The findings indicate that Iran's participation in the BRI is underpinned by strategic economic and political considerations. Economically, Iran benefits from China's investments, which include infrastructure development, energy projects, and enhanced trade connectivity. These investments not only help Iran counterbalance the adverse effects of U.S.-led sanctions but also facilitate its integration into global supply chains. Politically, the partnership

signals a shift away from Western-dominated frameworks and aligns with Iran's broader objective of promoting a multipolar world order. By participating in the BRI, Iran amplifies its influence in regional and international politics, particularly in Central Asia and the Middle East, while simultaneously strengthening its ties with other emerging powers such as China and Russia. Iran's geographical significance in the BRI framework cannot be overstated. Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, Iran serves as a critical transit hub within the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Key infrastructure projects, such as the development of ports like Chabahar and Bandar Abbas and railway connections with neighboring countries, underscore Iran's capacity to facilitate trade and energy transport across the region. These projects not only elevate Iran's strategic importance within the BRI but also contribute to the diversification of China's energy supply chains, ensuring greater security for both nations.

Despite these opportunities, the partnership is not without challenges. Iran's growing economic reliance on China could potentially limit its autonomy in decision-making, particularly as Beijing continues to expand its geopolitical influence. Moreover, the partnership intensifies competition with regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and raises concerns among other global actors, including the United States and India. These dynamics underscore the delicate balancing act required of Iran to maintain sovereignty while reaping the benefits of its strategic concordance with China. Academically, this study bridges significant gaps in the literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of Iran's foreign policy approach within the context of the BRI. While prior research has largely focused on the economic or strategic aspects of Iran-China relations, this work integrates an Islamic ideological perspective, emphasizing principles such as justice, sovereignty, and self-reliance as enshrined in Iran's constitution. This multidimensional approach provides a better understanding of how Iran navigates its partnership with China, balancing ideological commitments with pragmatic necessities. The study also contributes to the broader discourse on global power transitions and the implications of China's rise for international relations.

In conclusion, Iran's engagement with the BRI exemplifies a dual narrative: one of strategic opportunity and one of potential vulnerability. As a key participant in the BRI, Iran positions itself as a central player in shaping regional and global connectivity while leveraging China's economic and political support to counterbalance Western pressures. However, this partnership necessitates careful management to avoid over-dependence on China and to address the broader geopolitical ramifications of its alignment. By pursuing a concordance strategy that integrates Islamic principles with pragmatic foreign policy objectives, Iran demonstrates its capacity to navigate complex international partnerships in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world. Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of this partnership, its implications for regional stability, and its broader impact on the evolving multipolar global order.

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