

Analyzing Iran's Geopolitical Relations with China in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Abstract

From Iran's perspective, China represents the most significant strategic partner in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite consistent political, geo-economic, and geo-strategic cooperation over the past decade, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA has led China to adopt a more cautious approach toward Iran. Although bilateral ties have grown closer over the last four decades, particularly in economic domains, geopolitical relations have remained asymmetrical—favoring China's national interests. China does not perceive Iran as a strategic actor of equal geopolitical weight due to its broader global and regional ambitions. The 25-year strategic cooperation agreement signed in 2021 aimed to deepen bilateral ties, but has yet to produce tangible results, partly due to U.S. pressure. This research uses a descriptive-analytical method and is of a fundamental nature. It aims to examine the capacities, challenges, and obstacles shaping Iran–China relations, offering solutions to rebalance this asymmetry. The study also investigates the strategic role of China in shaping regional policies and explores the evolution of Iran's geopolitical engagement in the Asia-Pacific realm. Data collection is based on library resources, academic papers, books, and online materials.

The research concludes that Iran must engage more strategically and symmetrically with China, aligning bilateral ties with mutual geopolitical interests. Strengthening such cooperation can help Iran leverage its strategic capacities more effectively in light of ongoing regional and global shifts.

Key words: Geostrategic Territories, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, Iran, China.

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1. Introduction

China has been the Islamic Republic of Iran's most significant external supporter from the outset. Since the American withdrawal from the atomic deal (JCPOA) in 2018, China has consistently criticised the US unilateral sanctions but has simultaneously put its investments on hold and significantly reduced its trade with Iran. China is obviously important for Iran at times of sanctions and of conflict with the US. China has increasingly promoted itself as a civilisational state with a long history of a different worldview to that of the liberal order and argues for a multipolar world order based on other civilisational (Andersen,2023:79). There are many shared historical experiences and similarities between Iran and China. Both are legacies of the long-lasting empires and civilisations in West and East Asia, respectively. Like other great Asian empires, Iran and China were confronted with the expansion of the European imperial powers in the early-nineteenth century which ultimately led to the dislocation of these ancient empires (Amineh,2022:28). Both Beijing and Tehran share a strategic plan to undermine US global hegemony, and both have encountered tensions, sanctions, and pressures originating from Washington. A relatively strong and independent Iran in the Persian Gulf would help China not only to ensure its interests in the region, but also to guarantee its energy security and embed its footprint in the Middle East. Consequently, in the age of relative decline of United States' power, and the rise of regional powers, the Sino-Iranian strategic partnership is changing the Middle East's security architecture. Iran's look East and China's march West strategic visions will meet in the Persian Gulf region (Saleh and Yazdanshenas,2023:1). Iran-China cooperation is not one-dimensional that based only on the economic interests of the two parties. It has other dimensions such as seeking new strategies to minimize the domination of the United States in Central Asia and the Middle East to ensure the efficient operation of their future political, economic, and strategic policies. In 2013, with the declaration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Iran-China cooperation increasingly became more critical for the two countries' political, national, and international interests. To this end, Iran and China have decided to sign a long-term (25 years) strategic cooperation agreement and Iran was admitted to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member in September 2021. Since Iran and China have common interests in political, economic, security, and military cooperation, it is predicted that the strategic and long-

standing cooperation between Iran and China will be one of the most significant factors to change the balance of the Middle East and Central Asia both politically and economically (Yildirimcakar,2023:344). Currently, the Asia Pacific region is considered as one of the most vital regions in international politics, which includes challenges and many opportunities for different countries. In the meantime, Iran with its unique geographical, economic and political features is of interest as one of the countries that is at the scope of Asia Pacific geostrategy. Although the relations between Iran and China have become closer in the last four decades, and Beijing has been one of Iran's partners in recent years, the relations between the two countries are asymmetrical, one-sided and toward China's interests. Besides, even though China is considered an important strategic partner for Iran, this is not the case for Iran. In 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year "strategic cooperation agreement" to deepen economic and security relations, but it has not been manifested because of Iran's unbalanced relations with other geostrategic realms. China has been the most important foreign supporter of the IRI since the beginning. Since the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018, China has always criticized US unilateral sanctions, but at the same time it has stopped its investments and significantly reduced its trade with Iran. Recent transmogrifications, Ukraine-Russia war, Gaza war, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, China's support for the UAE's claim on the three islands, the 25-year contract between Iran and China, American sanctions, Iran's economic problems and the problems of the nuclear deal are the significant challenges for the relations between Iran and China. The question of this research is how should be the geopolitical relations between Iran and China? In response, it should be said that the geopolitical relations between Iran and China should be symmetrical, two-way and in the direction of the geopolitical interests and goals of the parties. The purpose of this research is to identify the geopolitical capacities, obstacles and challenges of Iran and China and to provide solution for the asymmetric relations between the two countries. Plus, the purpose of this research is to investigate the effective factors in the formation of Iran's geopolitical relations with China in the eastern region of the Asia Pacific geostrategy and to investigate the role of China as one of the important powers in politics and regional relations.

Geostrategy

Geostrategy, a subfield of geopolitics, is a type of foreign policy guided principally by geographical factors as they inform, constrain, or affect political and military planning. As with all strategies, geostrategy is concerned with matching means to ends. Strategy is as intertwined with geography as geography is with nationhood, or as Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan state it, " (geography is) the mother of strategy (Chitadze, 2023:19). geostrategy can be described as the location(s) on which a country puts special emphasis and devotes political/diplomatic/military resources, illustrated in its foreign policy goals. The location of the state is paramount in determining the best geostrategic approaches that can be pursued. It is also noticeable that in the past decades, there has been a shift in understanding geostrategic approaches, switching from a rather military framework to an economic one (Chihai,2019:1). Geostrategy talks about the relationship between geography and strategy, especially military strategy. Geostrategy is the science of discovering the relationship between strategy and the geographical environment, which deals with determining the geographical territory of military strategies in order to correctly guide military operations (Hafeznia,2022:184). Geostrategic security is about geostrategy and diplomacy that a nation may follow for maximising overall national security by governance. In this setting, a nation needs to think and premise strategic plans as part of the global system dynamics. The primary focus is to ensure that the nation is not considered a deceptive entity by others (Paleri,2022:661). Geographical location of a state plays an important role in determining its foreign policy. Throughout history, natural terrain has been used as a military tool, with rugged mountains being a major defensive fortress behind which human organizations have been protected from invasion attempts, while seas have been a natural buffer that could only be overcome with the formation of the Navy and the accompanying development of strike force that allows for targeting coasts and establishing a safe landing zone. Based on geopolitical realities and perceptions, geostrategy has emerged as a subfield of geopolitics. Unlike geopolitics, which is concerned with studying the foreign policy of the state in the light of its geography, geostrategy focuses on identifying a territory which, if dominated, makes it easier for the dominating state to build on and move towards global influence. Regardless of considerations of global hegemony, each state has its own geopolitical calculations, but only global powers have

direct geostrategic calculations (Strategiecs.com,2021). Specifically, the scientific discipline of geopolitics synthesizes the different socioeconomic analytical tools, having as final goal to propose and implement a proper strategy (geostrategy) by focusing on increasing national power and broadening the control of a geographic territory (Charis Vlados,2019: 65).

Geopolitics

It seems that Saul Bernard Cohen has provided a relatively comprehensive and realistic definition of geopolitics with the essence of the ancient science of geography. He writes: Geopolitics is the result of the influence of the components of geographical space on the power and competition of actors, which in the framework of the evolution of spatial approaches, presents new arenas to actors and causes the power centers to change from one region to another. It becomes global in geography. Actors are looking for hegemony in these spaces as part of the realities of the geographical space. According to him, the relationship between international political power and geographical relations is called geopolitics (Kohen,2014). The study of the geographical factors in world politics and inter-state relations. The term is also used more generally to describe regional strategic relations, as in 'the geopolitics of the South China Sea'. In the present day it covers much the same ground as International Relations, although with greater emphasis on geographical factors such as location, resources, and accessibility. Within this broad definition, there are many variants and the differences between them are significant. In part, these stem from the chequered history of the term 'geopolitics', which fell from favour across much of the Anglo-American world after the 1940s (Researchguides.dartmouth.edu,2024). Geopolitics is the study of how geography affects politics and international relations. Within the field of geopolitics, analysts study actors—the individuals, organizations, companies, and national governments that carry out political, economic, and financial activities—and how they interact with one another. These relations matter for investments because they contribute to important drivers of investment performance, including economic growth, business performance, market volatility, and transaction costs (Cfainstitute.org,2024). a study of the influence of such factors as geography, economics, and demography on the politics and especially the foreign policy of a state (Merriam-webster,2024). Geopolitics is a framework that we can use to understand the complex world and analyze the

competition of global and regional actors around us (Chass.usu.edu,2023). The word geopolitics was originally coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén about the turn of the 20th century, and its use spread throughout Europe in the period between World Wars I and II (1918-39) and came into worldwide use during the latter. In contemporary discourse, geopolitics has been widely employed as a loose synonym for international politics (Britannica,2024). the current shifts in the post-Cold War international order are bringing the attention to notions of great power competition, demonstrating once again the geopolitical significance of Europe and Asia for global politics (Marinova,2023:117). China's emergence as a powerful challenger to the US's and the west's well-crystallized position atop the global hierarchy poses the question of how to co-exist peacefully (Wade,2023:13). Hopes were high in the post-Cold War era that former geopolitical rivals like Russia and China could be integrated into a globalizing liberal international order of Western design. Since the late 2000s, however, both Russia and China have emerged as revisionists that seek to modify the international order (Groitl,2023:3). In this section, an attempt has been made to clarify the nature of the term geopolitics in the ongoing geopolitical struggle between great powers and regional powers.

Geoeconomics

Geopolitics and geoeconomics are often addressed together, with the latter seen as a sub-variant of the former (Wigell and VihMma,2016:605). geoeconomics should be considered as a form of grand strategy and defined as the use of economic instruments to advance mid- to long-term strategic interests in a geographical region of the world (Dong Jung Kim,2020:321). Geoeconomics is an interdisciplinary analysis that includes geopolitical factors, economic intelligence, strategic analysis and foresight and has the objective to provide a tool for states and businesses to develop and implement successful strategies to conquer markets, and protect strategic segments of the domestic economy, among other (Csurgai,2017:38). The term geoeconomics has become popular but it lacks an agreed definition. Most commonly, it is understood as the use of economic tools to advance geopolitical objectives. Other definitions reverse the ends and means, emphasizing how flexing geopolitical muscle is used for economic results. Broadly, one can think of geoeconomics as the interplay of international economics, geopolitics and strategy (Chathamhouse.org,2016). the study or application of the influence of geography on domestic and international

economics (Dictionary.com,2024). Geoeconomics represents the convergence of economics and geopolitics, a realm where economic power is wielded to achieve strategic objectives on the global stage. It recognizes that in today's interconnected world, economic forces play a crucial role in shaping the political and security landscapes among nations (ui.se,2023). The term geoeconomics is in much use today, but almost always without a specific working definition.¹ Some authors tend to focus on the use of geopolitical or military power for economic ends.² Others tend to define geoeconomics more broadly, as “the entanglement of international economics, geopolitics, and strategy,” a kind of catch-all definition that obscures more than it clarifies.³ Still others primarily stress trade and the protection of industries (Degruyter.com,2016).

Saul Bernard Cohen's Theory of Global Geopolitical System

In the spatial hierarchy of the global structure, the highest level is the realm of geostrategy. These realms are parts of the world. They are large enough to have features and functions that have global impact and to meet the strategic needs of the powers, governments, and large regions they comprise. Their frameworks are shaped by circulation patterns, which connects people, goods and ideas together (Cohen,2014:36). The second level of geopolitical structure is the geopolitical region. Some regions can be sub-regions, some of them may be located between them or independent of them. Regions are linked by geographic proximity and political, cultural, and military issues, and possibly by historical migration and intermingling of peoples and shared national histories. The regions of the sea realm include North and Central America, Western Europe and the Asia Pacific Rim. The southern hemisphere of South America and sub-Saharan Africa are dominated by maritime territory and are economically dependent on it. However, they are of marginal strategic value to the present great powers. Therefore, they are not in the orbit of their geostrategy. The Arctic region of Eurasia includes two geopolitical regions: 1. Heartland of Russia, 2. Caucasus and Central Asia. Central and East Asia are also divided into two regions: mainland China and Indochina, the latter of which includes Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Laos. South Asia as an independent geopolitical region is separated from three territories which when connected with the region gives the region instability. The sub-Arabic nature of South Asia is strongly reflected in its trade pattern (Cohen,2014:40). Increasing

geostrategic rivalry has been a destabilising force over the last decade. China's growing engagement in the Pacific has seen an influx of new international partners and increased access to much-needed finance for Pacific Island countries. It has also coincided with the rise of a more assertive 'Blue Pacific' diplomacy by Pacific Island states (<https://www.apf.gov.au,2021>). The Asia-Pacific region is actually the third largest geopolitical power center in the world. The maritime territory of this region is more than six thousand miles stretched in a crescent and arc. It starts from South Korea, Japan and Taiwan (at least for now) and extends through the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, Papua New Guinea and Australia and New Zealand. Asia Pacific is actually to establish economic relations with China in the west and to establish military relations with America in the east from the long-term perspective of becoming a separate passage between the two great powers rather than remaining as a part of the maritime domain (op.cit:315).

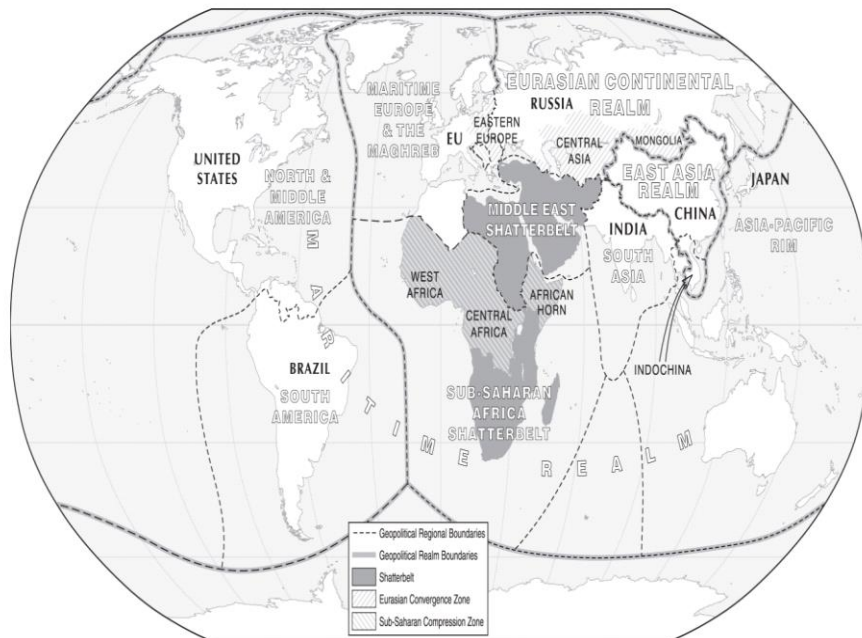


Figure 3.1. The Geopolitical World: Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

Fig (1): Territories and Geopolitical Zones

(Source: Saul Bernard Cohen *Geopolitics of the World System*:41)

2. Research Methodology

2-1. Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical method to examine the geopolitical dynamics between Iran and China within the geostrategic framework of the Asia-Pacific region. The study is qualitative in nature and falls under the category of basic research aimed at enhancing theoretical understanding of geopolitical relationships.

The method of data collection relies primarily on secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed scientific articles, academic books, policy reports, official government documents, and credible online resources relevant to the geopolitical interactions between Iran and China. Special attention has been given to sources that explore the Asia-Pacific region's strategic significance and China's foreign policy behavior in this context. In order to provide a comprehensive and multi-dimensional analysis, the study applies a geopolitical perspective focused on assessing Iran's strategic positioning and interactions with China over the past decade. The research emphasizes the identification of structural patterns, underlying challenges, and asymmetries in the bilateral relationship.

Through this methodology, the study aims to evaluate the evolving nature of Iran-China geopolitical ties, the influence of external powers—particularly the United States—and the role of regional dynamics in shaping these relations. Ultimately, this approach enables the development of a conceptual framework for understanding how Iran can leverage its geopolitical potential more effectively in relation to China and within the broader Asia-Pacific geostrategic landscape.

2-2. Strategic Relations between China, Iran and America in the Geostrategy of Asia-Pacific

During the last three decades, China has made significant progress, especially in the fields of economic development, defence, science and technology, and multilateral cooperation. Its emergence as a global power has also increasingly been challenging the US position. Many economic and strategic initiatives taken by China have provided it with strategic space and depth in the neighbouring region as well as the world also. The country is now openly displaying its military power and acting as a hegemon in the South and the East China Sea. The US is trying to counter the emerging influence of China by developing different alliances and partnerships in the

Asia-Pacific and other regions. Thus, rivalry and tension have been increasing between China and the US and its allies (Zafar,2023:20). The wave of new globalization coincides with the phenomenon of increased regionalization and novelties regarding power-sharing at the global level. The insights also address China's noteworthy implications in the Middle East and North Africa. China has set a footprint in the developing countries, in a mutual-beneficiary relationship style, displaying its own approach of diplomatic engagement with countries of the region, in the wake of American dwindling presence in this Eurasian area, focusing instead on Asia-Pacific (Caba-Maria,2023:563). In the 1990s, China's economic emergence was narrated as part of the broader rise of the Asia-Pacific region that would promote economic interdependence and regional peace (Connery,1994). By 2017, President Donald Trump had replaced the Asia-Pacific with the "Indo-Pacific". Since then, except for China, purchase of the term Indo-Pacific has caught on in official circles from London, India, Vietnam, Australia to New Zealand. China's inclusion is ambiguous, even absent, in the United States-led IPAC (Doyle & Rumley,2020). While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also a recent construction, it has a long history that draws its legitimacy from the Silk Road (Winter,2022), and has become a dominant spatial imaginary advanced by President Xi Jinping (Poon et al,2024). Decades of Iran's diplomatic tug-of-war with the United States and the sustained US embargo vis-a-vis that country has generally created dual impacts on the Islamic Republic for several years now: One can be seen in terms of how the embargo has effected the Iranian economy while the other side can be seen through the flourishing economic and political ties between Iran and China. Given China's role as a rising global power, Iran's willingness to accommodate China's Belt and Road Initiative may not be seen as the best choice but the most practical and pragmatic option to secure Iran's national economic and political interests in the presence of external pressures from the United States as well as from several members of the international community. Controversies surrounding the Iranian nuclear program as well as Iran's staunch foreign policy on anti-imperialism and non-intervention by extra-regional players since the early years of the Islamic Republic remain the critical factors that constrained Iran from fully developing its economic and political relations, particularly with the United States. With China's Belt and Road Initiative offering an alternative and "no-strings attached" strategic option for Iran, the future

bilateral relations are expected to be productive and mutually beneficial to both nations (Sevilla,2023:99). Against the background of the intensified U.S.-Chinese strategic competition in recent years, this paper examines the implications of the Ukraine war for security in the Asia-Pacific. Based on a qualitative analysis of hundreds of governmental documents, speeches and news articles, the study finds that both the United States and China have exploited the Ukraine war to double down on their strategic rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. The Biden administration has cast China and Russia as similar threats to the international order; intertwined Europe's problems with those of the Asia-Pacific; and pursued a global anti-authoritarian alliance directed against both Russia and China. China has become an increasingly uninhibited security-seeker as it has recognized its own rapidly deteriorating security situation; America's resolve to maintain its China policy; and a unique strategic moment in which to present itself globally as an anti-hegemonic, responsible great power. Given these developments, the security situation in the Asia-Pacific is becoming ever more volatile (Winkler, 2023:45). Due to Iran's strategic location, rich oil and natural gas reserves and joint opposition to the US hegemony, China has been employing different instruments of Soft Power to gain influence in that country (Yellinek,2022:733). The geo-economic relations between Iran and China can increase in the coming decades due to Iran's huge geo-energy, China's need for more energy for industrial development and production growth with economic growth above 5% at a faster rate of increase and mutual dependence of the two countries. Between Iran and China and strategic cooperation in political, security, economic and regional fields, with the increasing challenge between China and the United States and Iran and the United States, it will inevitably increase rapidly. These relations are considered as part of the international strategies of both countries in the global region. China prioritizes the national in its strategies. The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China may spill over into Europe through extraterritorial sanctions. The Iran-US dispute shows that Europe's loss of the American market has been a powerful way to limit Europe's trade with Iran (Eckhard,2023:15). Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations between Iran, the US, and its allies have deteriorated. The US and the West pressurised Iran by imposing sanctions, especially after the Iranian hostage crisis and the development of its nuclear programme. Iran wanted to counter Israeli nuclear ambitions by developing its programme but had to face

sanctions. Due to these sanctions, Iran's economy suffered severely. Despite having vast energy resources in the form of oil and gas, it could not achieve its full economic potential. During Hassan Rouhani's presidency, Iran signed a nuclear deal (JCPOA) with the US-led Western alliance. Still, the unilateral withdrawal of the US under Donald Trump proved that compromise between Iran and the US is almost impossible from their present standpoints. In this situation, Iran had to find other partners to help it counter the Western pressures for its economic survival. The Oriental powers like Russia and China provided a good opportunity for Iran to counter sanctions. Therefore, Iran also began to focus on other Eurasian and Southeast Asian economies (Abbas,2023:59). China–Iran strategic deal signed on March 27, 2021 has initiated an interesting debate in the regional political discourse. Many area study experts view it as a game changer that has the potential to revamp the complexion of the regional politics. The US sanctions against Iran forced Tehran to move towards a historic deal with China to mitigate the US influence in the region (Malik and Barrech, 2021:1). Since 2005, Iran has put the policy of looking to the east in its foreign policy. And from 2021 and the conclusion of the 25-year strategic agreement between Iran and China, it will pursue a serious and practical approach to the East centered on China. Changing geopolitical dynamics, with the emergence of China as a key player and the diminishing role of the United States as a global power, have shifted the region towards the Asia-Pacific region. Today, the region has become a hotbed of flashpoints as China seeks to shift the balance of power in its favor, while the United States ignores Chinese intentions. However, in order to reduce this threat, the United States of America in the Obama administration had already diverted its foreign policy from Asia and the Pacific with the "Asia-centric" policy. With Trump came a new strategy of a free and open Indo-Pacific, thereby treating the Indian Ocean as part of the big game. US policymakers need to fill the power vacuum in the Asia-Pacific region and counter China's growing influence throughout the region. Therefore, in 2011, the Obama administration announced its "Asia-Pacific Pivot" policy. This required a shift from military occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan to a deeper strategic immersion in the Asia-Pacific that brought the disputed South China Sea into the South China Sea (Airuniversity.af.edu,2022). The United States is a global power with global interests. If one region falls into chaos or is dominated by a hostile power, it will have a devastating effect on US

interests in other regions. This strategy identifies the People's Republic of China as America's most important geopolitical challenge. America will work with any country, including its geopolitical rivals, willing to work constructively with us to address common challenges. On the other hand, the US has expanded its cooperation with other like-minded countries from the Quad Indo-Pacific Alliance (Australia, India, Japan, US) to the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, from (Australia, UK, US) will continue to (India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, United States of America). The People's Republic of China is the only competitor that intends to change the international order and has the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do so. Beijing has ambitions to create an increased sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and become the world's leading power. It uses its technological capacity and growing influence over international institutions to create more peaceful conditions for its authoritarian model and shape the use of technology and global norms to advance its interests and values. Beijing often uses its economic power to coerce countries. It benefits from the openness of the international economy while limiting access to its own domestic market, seeking to make the world more dependent on the People's Republic of China while reducing its dependence on the rest of the world. The People's Republic of China is also investing in a rapidly modernizing military, increasingly capable in the Indo-Pacific, and growing in power and influence globally. All this while seeking to destroy US alliances in the region and around the world (America's national security strategy,2022).



Fig (2): Iran-China Silk Road Project
(Source: <https://uwidata.com/4707>)

2-3.Geopolitical Relations between Iran and China

China's rising global status in different realms predominantly through major projects such as Belt and Road Initiative, continuum on status quo in the Middle East, led China to seek potential cooperation opportunities on emerging technologies, based on anti-US alternatives which clearly directed to regional powers such as Iran (Eslami et al,2023:543). tumultuous relations between Saudi Arabia and the US due to 9/11 incident and Arab Spring are giving space for the other powers i.e., China to influence in Middle East. The Chinese influence has considerably increased due to successfully mediating efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Nawaz,2023:313). Therefore, it would be crucial to ask how Iran would evaluate China's increasing engagement in the Persian Gulf, especially its close ties with Iran's archrivals. As history suggests, Iran's relations with great powers in the Persian Gulf, coupled with the dynamics of transition in the international system, may be the most critical factors shaping the Sino-Iranian relations in the Persian Gulf (Shariatnia and Kermani,2023:36). Chinese foreign policy is at the crossroads of regional interests and global power rivalry in the Middle East, especially in Iran. China's interests in the Middle East increasingly collide with those of the US, which has brought about a significant re-orientation of Chinese foreign policy on this region. Beijing is increasingly concerned with balancing US influence in the region. Relations with Iran offer China various possibilities for balancing US influence (Stanzel,2022:4). In March 2021, a strategic document for a long-term cooperation in different areas, including energy, banking, telecommunications, ports, railways, healthcare, and information technology, over the next 25 years was signed between Iran and China. The present contribution argues that Iran-China's Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) to China is considered as a step for the reconstruction of the Silk Road as well as promoting the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). This is while Iran sees the present partnership as an alternative for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which allows the country to neutralize international sanctions and survive in the international system (Eslami and Kemie,2023:575). Iran has become increasingly reliant on China to survive existential crises, including diplomatic isolation, regional tensions and a rocky economy. In March 2023, China—Iran's largest trade partner—brokered an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic ties seven years after severing relations. The deal reflected

Beijing's growing influence and interest in Iran (Iranprimer.usip.org,2023). The IRI, as a regional power with effective acting potentials in the international arena, while being affected by the transformations of international relations, seeks to influence the existing relations and formations. Iran's vast and distinct geography, huge energy resources in Iran and around, composition and quality of young and talented population structure, ideological cohesion, depth and breadth of cultural influence, unique geopolitical position with strategic mutual effects on regional developments and other many relative advantages are among the prominent characteristics of Iran in the international space. Despite this, the stability and provision of internal and external security, economic growth and development, extensive communication with the scope of software and influence on regional and extra-regional developments of Iran, are realized in the conditions that the IRI design and formulate its sustainable development, internal and external interactions in the form of a comprehensive strategy based on geographical and geopolitical realities and the approximate advantages of the country. This is important from the point of view of political geography and geopolitics, it represents a strategic design called geopolitical strategy, which to explain why and how to formulate it, it can be said that it is an operational overview with the attitude and approaches of strategy based on geographical realities that generate power; In such a way that with a comprehensive view from far to near or from top to bottom, it provides the platform to enter the power scenes at the minimum cost and at the highest possible level with the aim of optimally representing and providing the comprehensive interests of the country (Akhbari,2024:193). One of the manifestations of China's emergence as a world power is the nature of its foreign policy, which tries to develop its bilateral relations with different regions. One of the areas in which China has tried to penetrate is the Middle East region. Currently, the geopolitical relations between Iran and China refer to the political, security and geographical interactions between the two countries. These relations include military issues, balance of power, diplomatic exchanges and regional cooperation. Also, factors such as the effects of foreign policy, military power and security exchanges are also effective in these relations. Both Iran and China have a very important geographical position. Iran, being located in the heart of the Middle East, and China, with its extend transportation and geographic scope in Asia, both countries are considered as important points

in international relations. In general, the geopolitical relations between Iran and China are influential and multilateral and include numerous cooperations in various fields. Iran and China can expand their cooperation in the field of security, fight against terrorism and regional threats. Cultural exchanges also play an important role in the relations between Iran and China.

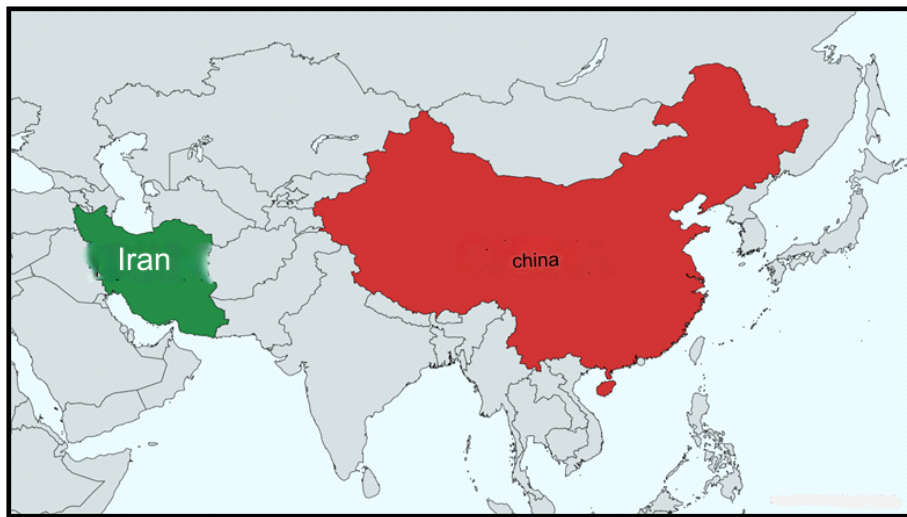


Fig (3): Political Map of Iran and China

(Source: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019>)

2-4. Geoeconomic Relations between Iran and China

International politics are largely determined by geo-economic factors, particularly, in the post-Cold War era. The pursuit of divergent geo-economic-cum-political interests has led to competition and conflict among a number of states, where states are exercising power through economic means (Ahmed Farhan et al, 2023:23). China became the world's largest net oil importer in 2013; half of this oil comes from the Middle East, and about 30% comes from the Gulf countries. Despite efforts to diversify its energy use, China is expected to import more oil from the Middle East (Yoncaci, 2023:6). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the largest regional development project in the history of global development. It is estimated that Chinese companies will invest up to \$1.2 trillion in infrastructure development in Asia and elsewhere in the coming years. However, there are many obstacles to the successful implementation of this initiative in the host

countries, including geographical factors, local culture, geopolitical contestation, public attitudes, institutional capacity, and governance quality. These challenges can substantially diminish the coherence of the BRI and prevent its effective implementation (Madani, 2022:53). China, as one of the consumer markets and sources of energy supply for Iran, plays a very important role in Iran's economy. Also, economic cooperation such as investments, international trade and technology exchanges are part of these relations. These relations have expanded in recent years due to the common economic and commercial interests of the two countries. Trade between Iran and China is very important as two countries with large consumer markets. Cooperation between Iran and China in the field of oil and gas export is very important. Technological cooperation and exchanges in the field of technology and innovation are also part of the geo-economic relations between Iran and China.

Table (1): China's Economic Statistical Indicators in 2022

Economic Statistical Indicators of China	Latest value
GDP	Trillion Dollars 17.96
GDP Per Capita	12,720.2
GDP Per Capita	3%
Unemployment, Total (% of Total Labor Force)	5%
Inflation, Consumer Prices (Annual %)	2%
Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)	0.1

(Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/china>)

Table (2): Iran's Economic Statistical Indicators in 2022

Economic Statistical Indicators of Iran	Latest Value
GDP	413.49 (2022 (Billion Dollars)
GDP Per Capita	4,669.6
GDP Per Capita	3.8%
Unemployment, Total (% of Total Labor Force)	8.7%
Inflation, Consumer Prices (Annual %)	43.5%
Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)	0.5

(Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/iran-islamic-rep>, 2022)

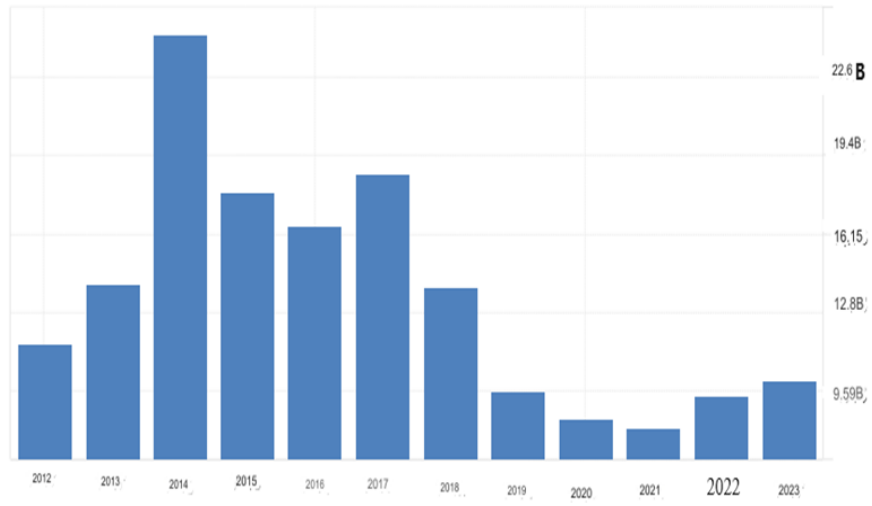


Fig (4): According to the United Nations International Trade Database Comtrade, China's Exports to Iran in 2023 were \$10.03 Billion
(Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com>,2023)

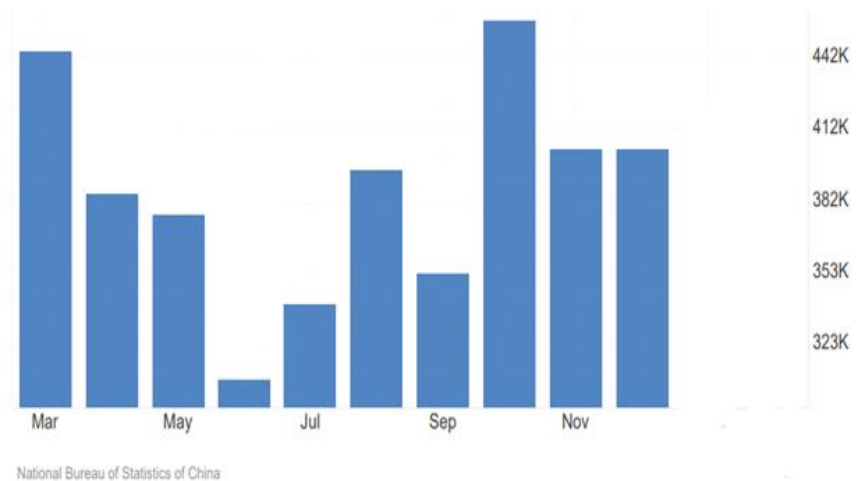


Fig (5): China's Imports from Iran in 2023
(Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/iran>)

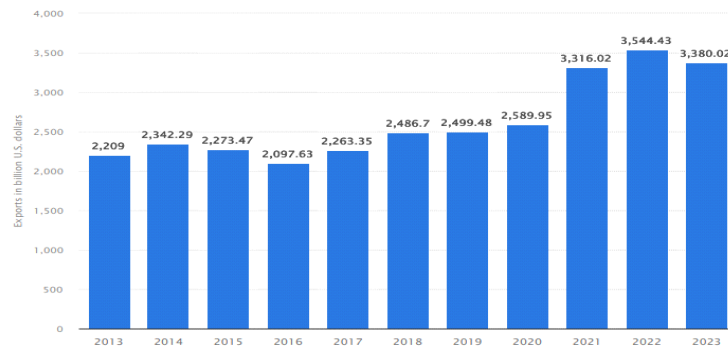


Fig (6): Value of Goods Exports from China from 2013 to 2023
(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263661/export-of-goods-from-china/>)

Table (3): Trade between Iran and China in 2022

China's Exports to Iran	Value	Iran's Exports to China	Value
Motor Vehicle Parts and Accessories	1.07 Billion Dollars	Ethylene Polymers	2.13 Billion Dollars
Car Body (including cabin)	553 Million Dollars	Acyclic Alcohols	826 Million Dollars
Broadcast Equipment	258 Million Dollars	Refined Copper	765 Million Dollars
China's Exports to Iran in 2022	9.44 Billion Dollars	Iran's Exports to China in 2022	5.72 Billion Dollars

(Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/irn>)

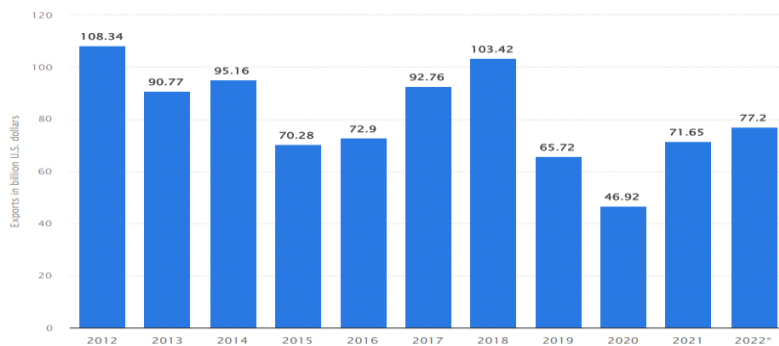


Fig (7): Iran: Export of Goods from 2012 to 2022
(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/294339/iran-export-of-goods/>)

2-5. 25-year Contract between Iran and China

In face of the changing international system, China and Iran are promoting strategic docking, and their relations have been updated from the comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 to the 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement in 2021. This development demonstrates the resilience of China's strategic partnerships in the Middle East, and is conducive to building a more balanced international system and fostering South-South cooperation (Khanmohammadi and Sun,2022:27). The US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and its ratcheting up of sanctions aimed to cut Iran's oil revenues virtually to zero by reducing trade between Tehran and its top foreign customers, especially China. This article examines the dynamics of the Sino-Iranian oil business and finds that the Chinese have never terminated their imports; instead, when Beijing cannot deal with Tehran directly, it continues the flow through subterranean methods. This practice holds some benefits for both sides, but the Iranian economy has become highly dependent on bartering with the East Asian power: exporting crude and receiving part of the revenues in Chinese goods and services. The two countries have vowed to keep up the oil trade, as sanctions have led Iran toward a growing economic and technological orientation toward the East (Azad,2023:23). In 2021, Iran and China signed the agreement to expand their cooperation in the areas of energy, technology, infrastructure, transportation, and ports development. The agreement was met with sharp reactions from some political factions inside Iran and Tehran's opposition abroad (Bagheri Dolatabadi,2023:59). China's deepening ties to Iran, evident in the comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) signed in 2021 after five years of stalled progress, is not an indication of a revisionist Chinese approach to the Gulf region. In fact, its CSPs with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, already activated and implemented, are at far more mature levels, commensurate with China's deep levels of economic and political engagement with the Arab side of the Gulf. This is consistent with a strategic hedging approach that Beijing has used to build a sustainable presence without disrupting a competitive and fragile regional order. With far larger and more diverse interests in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, China's partnership with Iran creates leverage due to the asymmetry inherent in the China-Iran relationship (Fulton,2021:203). China is undoubtedly the biggest phenomenon of the 21st century. A country that has allocated the production of more than 17% of the world production in

2023, has surpassed other countries in the world in terms of speed and scope in the construction of infrastructures and super projects. China is currently (2024) the number one trading partner of more than 130 countries. In the Middle East, although some countries may be pro-West and allies of the United States, they trade extensively with China. Currently, the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf, has attracted China's attention and is trying to enter this region in the form of the "Belt and Road Initiative". Iran, as a strategic country in the Middle East, Asia and the world, is one of the most important geographical areas of China's attention, and due to its investment capacity and capital export to the Persian Gulf region, China can invest in Iran's oil and gas industries and rich mineral resources. slow down and cause economic prosperity and wealth production in Iran. After the Cold War, with the defeat of bipolar and ideological rivalries, economic relations developed. The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were the decades of the emergence of new economic powers in Asia. One of these powers was China, which achieved a great leap in its economy with extensive reforms since 1979 and expanding its relations with the West and attracting investment from developed countries. In the first two decades of the 21st century, no country has received as much attention from the world's superpower, the United States, as China. Because this has been the biggest challenge to America's economic power. Therefore, policies to contain China have always been on the agenda of America and the West. To counter US-centric Western actions, China has taken extensive steps to engage with emerging economies such as BRICS, the Eurasian Bank and the initiative of beltway and road, the latest of which is a global geo-economic mechanism. This super project has annexes in the form of bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements, among which we can mention the comprehensive cooperation agreement (25 years) between Iran and China (Zarei et al.,2023:19). In the comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China, China would invest 400 billion dollars in infrastructure and other economic, industrial, mining, and academic sectors in the next 25 years. It means 16 billion dollars every year from 2022 onwards, while the average investment of China in Iran has been below 270 million dollars, which illustrates that this comprehensive cooperation has not played a role in the development of Iran and the implementation of the planned projects during these three years, and Iran's

relations with China have been continued asymmetrical, one-sided, and in line with China's national interests.

3. Analysis and Investigation

Totally, Iran's geopolitical relations with China's Asia-Pacific geostrategy are developing, and both countries, having common interests in some scopes, are strengthening their relations. Briefly, Iran's geopolitical relations with the geostrategic territory of Asia-Pacific, especially China, have been developed, and considering the common interests and desires of both sides, it is expected that these relations will improve and expand in the future. Politically, Iran and China are constantly strengthening their cooperation in this field due to their common criticisms against the policies of the United States and some Western countries. Also, both countries are seeking to strengthen their military capabilities and increase their presence in the Asia Pacific region in order to increase their military and political capabilities and strengthen their role in the region. In the field of security, bilateral cooperation is emphasized to deal with common security threats, including terrorism, expanding military dominance and dealing with international sanctions. Also, security cooperation is very important to maintain establishment and stability in the region. Economically, the cooperation between Iran and China, especially in the fields of oil and gas, mining, industry and construction, agriculture and information technology, has led to very extreme trade exchanges. These cooperations are considered as an important platform for the development of bilateral relations and realization of common economic interests. In the field of security, also, American policies and security measures in the Asia-Pacific region can have a great impact on Iran's relations with this region and China. For instance, America's role in maintaining maritime security and ensuring the free movement of ships in this region can be considered as an important factor in the relations between Iran and China with the Asia Pacific region. American sanctions policies against Iran and other sanctions that also belong to Chinese companies and banks have had a significant impact on the economic relations of these countries. For example, sanctions against Iran's oil exports and banking sanctions against Chinese companies and banks have caused many restrictions in these relations. America, as one of the prominent powers in the Asia Pacific region and the world, plays an important role in determining policies and developments in the region.

America's policies towards Iran and China can be considered as one of the determining factors in the process of their international relations and have great effects on the bilateral relations of these countries. The US military and security presence in the Asia Pacific region has wide-ranging effects on Iran's relations with this region and China. American security and military policies in this region can be considered as one of the determining factors in determining the policies and relations of these countries with the region. The statement of the summit of the China-Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) indicates China's support for the position of the UAE in its long-term dispute with Iran over the three islands. However, Iran is important for China and defines the three areas of Iran's energy, economy and geopolitical position. These components make Iran important in China's global development policy. Where the Belt and Road Initiative is at the core of China's geoeconomic and geopolitical strategy. Therefore, China is looking for its interests in the West Asian region, but it is not willing to pay for Iran's interests. For this reason, de-escalation with the mediation of China between Iran and Saudi Arabia lead to the normalization of relations in the Middle East. Despite Beijing being Tehran's largest trading partner, the potential of the relation between China and Iran remains large unstated and largely suffers from the impact of sanctions and international isolation. The main issue investigated in this article is the analysis and investigation of Iran's relations with the geostrategic region of Asia Pacific, so that the effects of these relations on the security and interests of Iran and the role of China in determining regional policies and relations are examined. According to the analysis, it can be concluded that Iran's geopolitical relations with the geostrategic territory of Asia Pacific and China are influenced by several factors. These factors include economic, political and security relations with each of these countries and the role of America as one of the key factors in the region. On the one hand, economic cooperation between Iran, China and other countries in the Asia Pacific region has provided many possibilities for trade exchanges and investments. On the other hand, sanctions and political and economic pressures, especially from the United States, have created restrictions on Iran's relations with this region and China. As a result, Iran and China are seeking to strengthen their relations in the economic, political and security fields, but the negative effects of sanctions and international pressure have also affected the relations of these countries. However, considering the important role of

America in the region, its policies and decisions can directly affect the relations of these countries with the region and China. According to the analysis of Iran's geopolitical relations with the geostrategic territory of Asia Pacific and China, it can be concluded that these relations are influenced by several different factors and have wide consequences for each country and region. Economic cooperation in the fields of oil, gas, and other natural resources benefits both countries and contributes to their economic development.

4. Conclusion

This analysis showed that Iran's relations with China are very important and influential in this region, and Iran should cooperate with China more intelligently in view of regional and global developments. Also, the geopolitical relations between Iran and China are asymmetric and one-sided, and more in line with the national interests of China, according to the geopolitical weight of this country. From the point of view of Iran and the world, China is the most important partner of Iran's geopolitical relations. Since 2018, when the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal, geopolitical relations with China have been particularly important for Iran. For this reason, in 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year "strategic cooperation agreement" to deepen economic and security relations, but this agreement was not implemented except in limited areas under the influence of the US behavior towards Iran and China's concern about the US. This shows the fact that China is looking for its own interests in the West Asian region and Iran's interests in this region are not part of China's priorities considering Iran's economic capacity. China does not only rely on Iran to supply the necessary energy, but they get their oil from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Russia, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. In order to achieve its geopolitical interests, China sought to balance the relations between the regional powers of the Persian Gulf by normalizing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This shows that China no longer intends to treat Iran and its Arab neighbors the same way. For this reason, China has practically confirmed the UAE's long-standing claims about the three islands and did not respect Iran's territorial integrity, which is why Iran seeks its own interests in its relations with China. Even Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) led by China is superficial and lacks strategic depth. Iran's accession to this organization does not mean the opening of a new era in Iran-China relations. Because the amount of profit

that China has from trade with Iran is not significant, and Iran has not been able to transform from a security unit to an economic unit for about four decades. Currently, there are many foreign obstacles in Iran-China relations in economic, political and security dimensions. Iran should balance its relations with other geostrategic territories in order to bring these asymmetric and one-sided relations to the benefit of China to a balanced, bilateral and significant relations.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest and that all ethical principles in research have been fully observed, including avoidance of plagiarism, duplicate publication or multiple submission of the manuscript, unauthorized replication of others' research, data fabrication or falsification, citation manipulation and reference fabrication, conducting research without informed consent of participants, research misconduct, and other unethical practices.

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