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SPECIAL SECTION: SINO-IRANIAN RELATIONS FROM
TENTATIVE DIPLOMACY TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

CHINA–IRAN RELATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEHRAN’S LOOK EAST APPROACH

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Introduction

Iran’s Look East approach has become a hot topic in recent years. The Look East approach emphasises that Iran should pay more attention to its exchanges with the ‘Oriental countries’ such as the Asian powers and Russia. There are two main factors driving the emergence of Iran’s Look East approach. One is the continuous sanctions imposed by the United States and other western powers. The other is that the Oriental countries, especially China, have become more and more influential in the world, as the global structure is transformed. To a large extent, embracing the East means embracing the future. China is one of the main targets of Iran’s Look East approach, and Iran also occupies an important position in China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. It seems that China–Iran relations should develop smoothly and rapidly. However, despite the two countries signature of the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement on March 27, 2021, it has not changed the reality that the bilateral relations still face many challenges and therefore have great uncertainties. China should pay more attention to Iran.

Iran's view of the Look East approach and relations with China

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, 'neither east nor west' was adopted as a maxim of its diplomacy. According to Khamenei, the current supreme leader of Iran, 'neither east nor west' meant that the Islamic Republic should protect itself, and it did protect itself, from entrance into the network of dependence on those superpowers.¹ However, obviously 'neither east nor west' did not place Iran in an ideal international environment.² In fact, as early as the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's policymakers had already begun to adjust its foreign policy, and gradually strengthened its exchanges with Oriental countries.³

As a clear diplomatic choice, Iran's Look East approach was first launched by President Ahmadinejad's administration (2005-2013). In order to balance the heavy pressure of Western sanctions on Iran, president Ahmadinejad hoped to carry out more cooperation with 'Oriental powers' such as Russia, China, and India. In an article in 2016, Iranian scholar Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami elaborated on the background of the Look East approach and its impact on Iran-China relations.⁴ Objectively speaking, the core or sole purpose of the Look East approach during President Ahmadinejad's period was to deal with pressure from the United States and other Western powers. Naturally, with the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015, western pressure on Iran dropped significantly. Over the next year or so, interactions between Iran and European countries greatly increased, and I personally saw many delegations from Europe in Tehran. Under these circumstances, the Iranian government's attitude towards the Look East approach was not so positive.

But this situation did not last long. The Trump administration's extreme pressure on Iran once again changed Tehran's attitude towards looking east. After taking office as President of the United States on January 20, 2017, President Trump implemented a policy of escalating pressure against Iran. Washington's extreme pressure on Iran has caused the relationship between Iran and the West once again to fall into serious difficulties. At the same time, the shift of world power to the East continues. In this situation, the Look East approach is no longer just seen by Tehran as a tool to counter US sanctions, but also as an opportunity for Iran to participate in reshaping the regional and even global structure.

Iran's increasing emphasis on the Look East approach was clearly reflected in a February 2018 speech by Khamenei in Tabriz. He said that: "In foreign policy, top priorities for us, today, include preferring the East to the West, preferring the neighbouring countries to the far reached locations, preferring nations and countries that share in our common goals".⁵ Khamenei's speech has been regarded as an upgraded version of the Ahmadinejad government's Look East approach. Just one day later, an article on Khamenei's official Persian website elaborated the six major reasons why Iran "prefers the East to the West" from an economic perspective.⁶ At a conference with the presence of a group of professors, experts and enthusiasts in the field of international relations on September 15th, Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's international affairs advisor, spent an hour and a half expounding ten questions related to the Look East approach, where he stated that the "Experts believe that power and wealth in the world are moving from west to east, and this can provide a variety of new opportunities for some countries, including Iran".⁷ On October 17, in a gathering of notable scientists, Khamenei mentioned the Look East approach from the perspective of scientific relations:

We should mainly look to the East. Our inclination towards the West – Europe and other such regions – will bring us nothing but a waste of time and trouble, and it will only force us to carry favors for them and become humiliated. We should be more inclined towards the East. There are countries which can help us: we can face them as equals. We can help them; they can help us: we can have positive scientific interactions with them.⁸

Khamenei's emphasis on the Look East approach has continued. For example, in a letter transmitted to Russian President Putin on February 8, 2021, Khamenei said:

Undoubtedly, the 21st century is the century of Asia. The Islamic Republic has always paid attention to Asia. There are many important and still untapped capacities in Asian countries such as Russia, China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and subcontinental countries and as a result, we could exploit them due to our common interests with such countries in Asia ... we should prefer the east to the west and neighboring countries to distant countries in order to safeguard the national interests of our country.⁹

The political leaders' emphasis on the Look East approach has naturally aroused the attention of Iranian scholars. Adami Ali explained the value of the Look East approach from the perspectives of history, civilization, politics, and geography. He believed that Iran had attached too much importance to the relations with Western countries and therefore ignored the East, which restricted the better development of Iran.¹⁰

An Iranian magazine, *The Age of Thought*, launched a 45-page column in 2018 focusing on the opinions of some experts on the Look East approach. Experts interviewed in this column emphasised the necessity of Iran's independent development, and also revealed Iran's distrust of major eastern countries such as Russia and China.¹¹ In April 2021, the official website of the Strategic Research Institute of the Expediency Council published an article by Dr. Rahim Bayazidi, arguing that Iran's foreign policy should have four priorities in the next ten years, including attention to the transfer of world power and the rise of Asian powers.¹²

China is one of the main targets of Iran's Look East approach. Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami analyzed Iran–China relations during Ahmadinejad's presidency. The problem that he considered was that during the Ahmadinejad administration, why did China and Iran, which seemed to need each other, not establish a better bilateral relationship? Pirsalami analyzed the respective reasons of the two countries, and concluded that third-party factors such as the United States restricted the development of Iran–China relations.¹³ In two published articles Sadeghi Seyed Shamseddin and Lotfi Kamran argued that in the face of US and European sanctions, the Look East approach was an important idea for Iran's development and Iran needed to look east even more. They held that China, which had rapidly risen and triggered the transfer of world power, was a country to which Iran must pay attention. The two authors also argued that Iran and China should establish a strategic economic alliance.¹⁴ Ekhtiari Amiri Reza and Salehi Khannar Mahboobeh emphasised the possible political and economic consequences of China–Iran exchanges from the Look East perspective. They believed that there would be huge room for the development of relations between Iran and China. However, in their views, deepening cooperation with China also had obvious adverse consequences for Iran, especially at the economic level.¹⁵

The 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement signed by Iran and China on March 27, 2021 is one of the results of the Look East approach. An article on the website of The Strategic Research Institute of the Expediency Council analyzed Iran's possible gains and challenges in this context.¹⁶ In fact, although Iranian officials have given positive comments on this agreement in public, there still have been quite wide disagreements among Iranian society and academic circles. Many Iranians worry that the comprehensive cooperation between the two countries will cause Iran to depend heavily on China, which will hurt Iran's independence. Former

Iranian President Ahmadinejad publicly criticised the Iran–China 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation and accused the plan of being a “traitorous act” of the Iranian government.¹⁷

In addition to China, Iranian scholars have also paid attention to other targets of the Look East approach, such as Russia, Southeast Asia, and India. According to Iran’s Scientific Information Database (SID), in terms of the number of country-specific research articles published by Iranian scholars in recent years, China lagged behind India, but the annual growth exceeded India; and the number of thematic papers on China and Russia increased significantly (See Table 1). It is worth noting that in the Look East column of *The Age of Thought* mentioned above, the cover of that issue of the magazine is a large photo of Russian President Putin, and the length of the interview about Russia is far longer than that of China. To a certain extent, this reflects China’s position in Iran’s Look East approach.

Judging from Iranian leaders’ statements, the Look East approach has been evolving from an expedient measure to deal with Western sanctions to a long-term strategy. However, some Iranian scholars are quite cautious about it. It is a fact that China is receiving more and more attention from Iran, but Iran does not yet view China as the number one option to the Look East approach. At present, Iran has shown a clear division of public opinion in terms of the Look East approach and its policy toward China. For example, in the editorial of the Islamic Republic newspaper on August 3, 2021, it was written that just as western powers cannot be trusted, eastern powers i.e. China and Russia cannot be trusted: “we should not be forced to trust the East because of distrust of the West”.¹⁸ It is particularly noteworthy that since the Trump administration of the United States imposed “maximum pressure” on Iran, the favorability towards China in Iranian society has declined, rather than improved.

Table 1. Comparison of the number of Iranian papers with China/Russia/India in the title included in the Scientific Information Database (SID) from 2017 to 2019. (1 article)

	2017	2018	2019
China	51	72	96
Russia	38	65	76
India	104	126	112

Source: [Iran] Scientific Information Database (SID), <https://www.sid.ir/en/journal/index.aspx>.

International Community's Views of Iran's Look East Approach and its Relations with China

As mentioned earlier, Iran's Look East approach originated from the need to balance Western sanctions during President Ahmadinejad administration, and by 2018 moved towards the position that Iran should "Prefer the East to the West". Naturally, Western powers have been paying more attention to this development of Iran's diplomacy. Iran's other target countries such as Russia and India, and Iran's enemies or competitors such as Israel and Turkey, also attach importance to Iran's Look East approach.

European powers used to be long-term important partners of Iran, so from an economic point of view, Iran's Look East approach has a greater impact on Europe than on other regions. In response to Iran's "preferring East to West", the French television station, France24, said "Iran's eastern shift shows patience running out with the West".¹⁹ With the support of The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) published *Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?*. In this book several scholars including professor Anoushiravan Ehteshami deeply analyzed the Asian strategy of Iran's diplomacy, and the relationship between Iran and China, Russia, India and the European Union.²⁰ The British International Institute for Strategic Studies published an article stating that although Iran wants to deepen its relationship with China, "the challenges to this initiative are considerable".²¹ An article published in Turkey asserts "At a time when European powers are proving their inability to economically extricate Iran from the White House's policies, officials in Tehran realise that the path forward is to integrate into economies of countries such as China which maintain substantially more autonomy from the US than the European states do".²²

As Iran's long-term enemy, the United States naturally is concerned with the Look East approach. The article "Iran Looks East, China Pivots West" published by *The Diplomat* elaborated on the deepening cooperation between Iran and China in energy and other fields, and held that "the two countries need each other, in a relationship that seems unlikely to be derailed soon".²³ Alex Vatanka, the director of the Iran Program and a senior fellow at the Frontier Europe Program at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., believed that Iran's Look East approach would not succeed, "Tehran pinned its economic hopes on China, India, Japan, and

South Korea. But those countries have largely left the country to ruin”.²⁴ Both Russia and China are the main target countries of Iran’s Look East approach and the three countries are often seen as possible ‘allies’ to counter Western hegemony. In their book published in 2018 Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary discussed the opportunities and challenges of the trilateral relations.²⁵ An article published in Australia said “Tehran has taken a significant step toward creating a multilateral framework for Eurasian security cooperation by convening its first ‘Regional Security Dialogue’ summit in late September 2018 with deputy national security advisers from Russia, China and India. In the face of US-led international sanctions, Tehran’s efforts to develop multilateral security cooperation are providing a framework for Asia’s giants to partner with Iran”.²⁶

Because China is one of the main target countries of the Look East approach, after the draft of the “Iran–China 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation agreement” was announced in June 2020 and finally signed on March 27, 2021, the international community has increased its attention to China–Iran relations. Israel, which regards Iran as the number one hostile country, is naturally very concerned about the comprehensive cooperation between China and Iran. *The Jerusalem Post*, the main Israeli English-language Newspaper, published at least six relevant reports in July 2020. India is also very concerned about China–Iran cooperation. Abhijit Singh, senior fellow of the Observer Research Foundation of India and a naval specialist emphasised “The maritime implications of growing China–Iran strategic ties” and said that the “greater Chinese naval presence in the Northern Indian Ocean in coming years raises the prospects of greater instability and elevated tensions in the Gulf region”.²⁷ An article published by *The Tribune* of India believed that Iran’s Look East approach may force the US to rethink its strategy towards Iran because “the US–Israeli pressure on Iran has impelled her to look to China and Russia for political, economic and strategic support”.²⁸ Alam Saleh and Zakieh Yazdanshenas published “Iran’s Pact with China Is Bad News for the West” and the title of the article clearly shows the author’s position.²⁹ Dina Esfandiary emphasised the challenges facing China–Iran cooperation: “From Tehran’s perspective, China also wasn’t always reliable when it came to standing up to the West’s sanctions on Iran ... China, like Iran, has been careful not to put all its eggs in one basket”.³⁰

It is worth noting that the possible cooperation between Iran and China has also been subject to some malicious reports and even attacks. As early as September 2019, *Petroleum Economist* published an article saying

that China and Iran are preparing to sign a large contract of up to 400 billion U.S. dollars. The contract “will include up to 5,000 Chinese security personnel on the ground in Iran to protect Chinese projects, and there will be additional personnel and material available to protect the eventual transit of oil, gas and petchems supply from Iran to China, where necessary, including through the Persian Gulf”.³¹ In July 2020, the BBC Persian repeated reports that Iran would hand over the two southern islands to China.³² Such rumors directly touched on Iran’s historical pain of being bullied by major powers, thereby making some Iranians more vigilant and opposed to China. An Iranian-born columnist writing for the *Algemeiner*, a U.S.-based paper sympathetic to Israel, said bluntly in April 2021 “the Islamic Republic appears to have ceded almost all of Iran’s natural and mineral resources, infrastructure, and markets to China for a quarter century, in exchange for security guarantees against the West”.³³ These unrealistic or even false reports made Iranian audiences feel that their national interests were not protected. Obviously, this has partially affected Iranian attitudes towards China and undermined cooperation between China and Iran.

In short, facing Iran’s Look East approach, European powers mainly worry that their economic interests may be challenged. After all, in history, especially in recent times before the Islamic revolution, European powers had more exchanges with Iran. The United States, which has been hostile to the Islamic Republic for more than 40 years, is concerned about the Look East approach mainly out of considerations of competition among world powers. Both Russia and China are regarded as strategic competitors by the United States, and the close cooperation between these two countries and Iran is obviously something the United States does not want to see. Deepening relations with Iran is also becoming an important policy choice for India, which has the potential to be a big power. New Delhi naturally hopes that Iran will be more friendly to India rather than its rivals. Turkey, moreover, is a potential competitor of Iran in the Middle East, and as Israel also sees Iran as its number one enemy, these two countries are certainly not willing to see Iran have a brighter future. Thus, when other countries consider Iran’s Look East approach, they usually regard China as a competitive or challenging actor.

Is Iran's Look East Approach a Sustainable Strategy?

Considering Iran's complicated internal political situation and its geostrategic vantage point, it is easy to understand why Iran's internal disputes and the concerns of other countries are aroused by the Look East approach. As one of the main target countries of the Look East approach, how does China view the Iran's diplomatic choice? China, so far, has made few official statements on Iran's Look East policy. As far as scholarly research goes, China has published only one relevant academic paper in 2017. This article held that the Look East 'strategy' began in the 1990s and was fully elaborated during the Ahmadinejad's presidency. The two authors focused on the background of the Look East approach and Iran's relations with Eastern powers. They believed that the Look East approach was a measure to deal with the pressure from the West and called on China to be cautious about it.³⁴

Since then, the Look East approach has changed and Iran is clearly a country to which Beijing should pay attention. But this is not the case. China's indifferent response to the Look East approach largely shows that its actual role at least in China–Iran relations is still relatively limited. Khamenei has indeed clearly affirmed the status of Iran's Look East approach again and again, and after China and Iran signed the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement, Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf said this "is a major element for production of power" within the framework of Iran's "Look to the East and Eurasia approach through a balanced and economy-oriented foreign policy".³⁵ However, many Chinese scholars believe that balancing the pressures of the United States and its Western allies is still the key factor in Iran's deepening relations with China. For example, in May 2021, when the presidents of Iran and China talked on the phone, "Iran's president says the Islamic Republic and China must join hands to counter the new cold war launched against independent countries by the United States and its Western allies".³⁶

It would not be unreasonable to say that many Chinese Middle East researchers still lack trust or confidence in Iran's Look East approach and even the China–Iran 25 year comprehensive cooperation agreement. Is the Look East approach Iran's long-term strategy? Is the signing of the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement with China just a stopgap measure for Iran to balance American pressure? After the improvement of relations with the United States, will Iran's Look East approach and comprehensive cooperation with China encounter fatal challenges? The

negative Iranian reactions to the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement and the close attention of the international community to it have further aggravated China's aforementioned suspicions.

In fact, since 2015 some characteristics of Iran's diplomacy have partly confirmed China's doubts. In January 2016, President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran one after another. However, Sino-Iranian relations did not develop as smoothly as Sino-Saudi relations and Sino-Egypt relations after this visit. As the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached in July 2015, there was an optimistic atmosphere in Iran that international sanctions would be lifted and relations with western powers would improve. During this period Iran expected more from European countries, and to a large extent Tehran did not give enough attention to Iran-China relations. Then the Trump administration imposed 'maximum pressure' on Iran and Iran's desire to improve relations with European countries were not realised. In this situation Iran has increased its emphasis on Sino-Iranian relations.³⁷ Such changes in Iran's diplomatic tendencies have caused some concerns in China.

Moreover, the third-party factors may also affect China's Iran policy. For decades Iran has been the target of US sanctions, and Sino-US relations have been the top priority of China's diplomacy. Since Iran began to emphasise the Look East approach again in 2018, Sino-US relations have been at a low ebb. As a result, Sino-US relations have likely affected China's attitude toward Iran's Look East approach. In addition, relations among Middle Eastern countries have been complicated. For example, both Israel and Saudi Arabia regard Iran as their worst enemy. Therefore, some Chinese scholars worry that the establishment of a comprehensive cooperative relationship between China and Iran is likely to arouse opposition from Israel and some Arab countries. These views are not conducive to the deepening of China-Iran relations.

Objectively speaking, China should understand that diplomatic pluralism can better safeguard Iran's interests. Iran has a diplomatic tradition of engagement with the West and the western powers are still the most developed countries in the world, so it is easy to understand that there are powerful forces in Iran that advocate the priority of developing relations with European and American powers. However, even if US-Iranian relations really improve in the future, Iran still needs to cooperate with the eastern powers. The history of Iran since the 19th century has proved that only when Iran establishes a balanced diplomacy among world powers will Iran better defend its own interests and gain more

benefits. Many Iranian policymakers and scholars are fully aware that the world's power structure is undergoing major changes, and multipolarisation is becoming the reality of the world. Iran's Look East approach has responded appropriately to this change.³⁸ Therefore, for Iran, even if the Look East approach is not a long-term strategy, it is no longer just an expedient measure to deal with Western sanctions.

As for China–Iran relations, China deserves more attention from Iran. Iran and China are countries at different levels in the international structure. Generally, world powers and regional powers face different international competitors.³⁹ The improvement of relations with China, which has a stated policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, will surely benefit Iran's national interests. For example, deeper cooperation with China could enable Iran to obtain more Chinese investment and technology, and to attract more Chinese tourists with huge spending power. Furthermore, deepening relations with China could also help Iran better balance its relations with other major powers.

China Should Pay More Attention to Iran

At present, Iran's development is indeed difficult. International sanctions on Iran have lasted for 40 years. The exchange rate of the Iranian Rial plummeted from about 4 million Rials to 100 U.S. dollars in early October 2017 to about 30 million Rials to 100 U.S. dollars in early October 2020. Even without taking other reasons into account, the exchange rate alone has caused heavy losses to foreigners who invest or do business in Iran. The willingness of external capital and businessmen to enter Iran has been severely affected. Severe international sanctions have caused not only the devaluation of Iran's currency, but also economic difficulties, few job opportunities, and rising domestic conflicts. Yet, Iran has the opportunity and the need to deepen relations with China as a potential solution to ease the pressure on governance.

It is a fact that there are different views on China and Iran–China relations in Iran today and some of them have quite a negative view of China. China should have a proper understanding of this. First, this is because of Iran's diplomatic tradition of engagement with the West. Some Iranians firmly believe that moving closer to Europe and America should be Iran's foremost foreign policy choice. Second, some Iranians are deeply unhappy with the current regime in their country, and thus oppose whatever the government supports. Some Iranians oppose signing the 25-year

comprehensive cooperation agreement with China for this reason. Third, critical assessments, some of which may be regarded as unrealistic propaganda circulated by commentators outside of Iran, have led some Iranians to believe that Iran's interests would be damaged by comprehensive cooperation with China. Fourth, some Iranians have negative feelings towards China on several particular issues. In these circumstances, Beijing must take active measures to allow countries including Iran to understand China well. I would argue that the deeper Iran's understanding of China, the easier it would be for China's exchange with Iran.⁴⁰

Although Iran has some negative views of China, Beijing needs to note that Iran will most likely regard China as a being an important partner for the foreseeable future. In fact, the Iran–China 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement can be regarded as a concrete example of Iran's Look East approach. Iran is a core country in the Middle East. In the past 40 years, China has maintained friendly relations with Iran despite the western sanctions against it. During President Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in January 2016, the two sides announced the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership, which highlights China's current friendly attitude towards Iran. China really needs the friendship of powerful regional countries like Iran and hope to deepen bilateral relations with Tehran.⁴¹

It must be noted that most of the current difficulties encountered by Iranian development are not caused by the country's natural conditions. Iran is rich in oil, natural gas and minerals. Iran has a unique geographical location, a long history and culture, and a high level of education. Even under the current state system, Iran still has obvious democratic characteristics. In short, Iran's current difficulties are mainly caused by policies. To change policy is relatively easy. Iran's current biggest development constraint is its foreign relations, especially its relations with Israel and the United States. The history of international relations tells us that sudden changes in international relations are not uncommon, such as Sino-US relations in the early 1970s. The relationship between Iran and the United States will not be forever confrontational.

Now Beijing urgently needs to consider Iran's role in China's international relations, and on this basis formulate and implement corresponding Iran policies. If China only regards the Look East approach as a matter of Iranian political expediency, this attitude itself can deprive Iran of the motivation to continue to befriend China. And, whilst developing relations with Iran, it is no longer necessary for China to think too

much about the opposition from the United States. In the eyes of current American policymakers, China needs to be suppressed more than Iran. No matter how the relationship between China and Iran develops, the US position of hostility to China will not change. It is impossible for China to restore Sino-US relations by alienating Iran. China needs to be more confident when developing relations with Iran, and to minimise the influence of third-party factors.

Conclusion

Iran, formerly known as 'Persia', has undergone several ups and downs in history, and has proven its ability to rise again. China must realise the true weight of Iran in the political structure of the Middle East.⁴² Ambitious Iranians will not be satisfied with the status quo of the country. Therefore, Iran will not stop exploring more effective diplomacy that can enhance its strength and influence. The current competition among major powers in the world provides Iran with both opportunities and challenges, particularly given Iran's highly favourable geostrategic position. Thus, interaction between Iran and the greater world powers is unavoidable.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Iran's diplomatic slogans have undergone a shift from 'neither east nor west' to the 'Look East' and 'prefer east to west'. The 'neither east nor west' with obvious Islamic revolutionary colors is Iran's active choice, while the Look East approach and the 'prefer east to west' are largely passive choices. If Iranians can clearly recall their painful experiences in history, they will know diplomatic pluralism or 'east and west' is the better choice for the country's foreign relations. As Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi said at his inauguration ceremony on August 5, 2021, "a successful foreign policy will be a balanced foreign policy".⁴³

Nevertheless, even from the long-held look west to "east and west", it is already a major change in Iran's diplomacy. At present, Iran has regarded its relationship with China as one of the main components of its multilateral diplomacy. At the same time, China is indeed working hard to deepen its relations with Iran, and the third-party influences in the process has become less and less. China and Iran cannot have more expectations for bilateral relations than these for the time being. Moreover, currently the Iranian regime put more emphasis on security, which makes Teheran have closer contacts with Russia. After all, Russia is more helpful to Iran in terms of security than China.

Of course, there is still room for further deepening of China–Iran relations. In a phone conversation with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on 18 August 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping said China stands ready to work with Iran to push for steady and sustained development of their comprehensive strategic partnership. The Iranian President responded that it is a foreign policy priority and focus of the Iranian government to steadfastly develop a more robust comprehensive strategic partnership with China.⁴⁴ In fact, the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement signed by China and Iran on 27 March 2021 is the blueprint for future bilateral relations. But it should be emphasised that whether it is now or in the future, both Iran and China urgently need to understand each other directly rather than through European and American perspectives. It is important for both parties to have a higher degree of mutual trust.

NOTES

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