



SINO-IRANIAN 25-YEAR COMPREHENSIVE COOPERATION AGREEMENT: A BALANCING ACT IN GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

ÇİN-İRAN 25 YILLIK KAPSAMLI İŞBİRLİĞİ ANLAŞMASI: JEOPOLİTİK DİNAMİKLERDE BİR DENGELEME EYLEMİ

Rahman NURDUN*

ABSTRACT

On 27 March 2021, Iranian and Chinese Foreign Ministers signed the Sino-Iranian 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement, which stands as a pivotal milestone in the evolving dynamics of international relations, particularly in the context of the intricate interplay between China and Iran. The rationale for these two countries reaching such an agreement emerges from a confluence of geopolitical, economic, and strategic imperatives. Both nations envisage substantial benefits from this collaboration, encompassing economic investments, technological exchanges, and geopolitical leverage. China's heavy investments in Iran underscore its commitment to bolstering economic ties and securing access to resources, while Iran stands to gain technological advancements and infrastructural development.

However, the implementation of this agreement encounters a labyrinth of challenges. Foremost among these challenges are the formidable barriers imposed by US sanctions on Iran, which impede the full realization of the agreement's potential. Geopolitical tensions, exemplified by conflicts in Ukraine, further complicate the landscape, casting shadows on the agreement's seamless execution. Amidst these challenges, the Iranian government adopts a positive stance, recognizing the strategic significance of this partnership. Yet, within academic circles in Iran, concerns and apprehensions reverberate,

ÖZ

27 Mart 2021 tarihinde İran ve Çin Dışişleri Bakanları, Çin-İran 25 yıllık kapsamlı işbirliği anlaşmasını imzaladılar ki bu, uluslararası ilişkilerin evrilen dinamikleri içinde, özellikle Çin ve İran arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimin bağlamında önemli bir dönüm noktası olarak durmaktadır. Bu iki ülkenin böylesi bir anlaşmaya varmasının nedeni, jeopolitik, ekonomik ve stratejik zorunlulukların birleşiminden ortaya çıkmaktadır. Her iki ülke de ekonomik yatırımlar, teknolojik alışverişler ve jeopolitik kaldıraç gibi geniş kapsamlı faydaları öngörmektedir. Çin'in İran'a yapmış olduğu büyük yatırımlar, ekonomik bağları güçlendirmeye ve kaynaklara erişimi sağlamaya olan taahhüdünü vurgularken, İran ise teknolojik ilerlemeler ve altyapı gelişimi elde etme niyetindedir.

Ancak, bu anlaşmanın uygulanması bir dizi zorluklarla karşılaşmaktadır. Bu zorluklar arasında, İran'a yönelik ABD yaptırımlarının yarattığı güçlü engeller anlaşmanın potansiyelinin tam anlamıyla gerçekleşmesine engel olmaktadır. Ukrayna'daki çatışmalar gibi jeopolitik gerilimler, manzarayı daha da karmaşık hale getirerek, anlaşmanın sorunsuz bir şekilde yürütülmesine gölge düşürmektedir. Bu zorluklar arasında, İran hükümeti stratejik önemini tanıyarak olumlu bir tavır benimsemektedir. Ancak, İran'daki akademik çevrelerde endişeler ve kaygılar yankılanmakta, nüanslı bakış açılarını yansıtarak anlaşmanın uzun vadeli etkileriyle ilgili önemli soruları gündeme getirmektedir.

*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, Başkan Yardımcısı, Dr.

E-posta: r.nurdun@tika.gov.tr

ORCID ID: 0009-0009-1677-5226

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reflecting nuanced perspectives and raising critical questions regarding the agreement's long-term implications. With all these factors in mind, this article is intended to give the readers a succinct overview of Sino-Iranian relations, then proceed to focus on various facets of this agreement, finally, this study will try to present this agreement as a balancing act of China and Iran through a comprehensive analysis of its underlying rationale, benefits, challenges, and nuanced stakeholder perspectives.

Keywords: China, Iran, US, Agreement, Sanctions.

Bu faktörlerin hepsi göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, bu makale okuyuculara Çin-İran ilişkilerinin özlü bir genel bakışını sunmayı amaçlamaktadır; ardından bu anlaşmanın çeşitli yönlerine odaklanacak ve nihayetinde, bu çalışma, anlaşmanın temel nedenlerini, faydalarını, zorluklarını ve nüanslı paydaş perspektiflerini kapsamlı bir analizle Çin ve İran'ın dengeleme çabası olarak sunmaya çalışacaktır."

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin, İran, Bileşik Devletleri, Anlaşma, Yaptırımlar.

Introduction

China-Iran relations have evolved significantly, encompassing economic, political, and strategic dimensions, shaping the geopolitics of the Middle East and Asia. In recent times, these relations have been characterized by mutual interests in energy, infrastructure development, and geopolitical alignments.

Economically, the bilateral ties have strengthened through substantial energy cooperation. Iran possesses extensive oil and gas reserves, and China, as one of the world's largest energy consumers, has sought to secure its energy needs. Both nations have engaged in energy agreements, including oil purchases, investments in Iran's energy sector, and discussions on energy infrastructure projects like pipelines and refineries. However, these collaborations have faced challenges due to international sanctions imposed on Iran, impacting the trajectory of their economic agreements.¹

Politically, China and Iran have displayed a pragmatic approach, emphasizing non-interference in each other's internal affairs. They have collaborated on diplomatic fronts, supporting each other in international forums on issues such as Iran's nuclear program and navigating regional tensions. Both nations have sought to maintain a strategic balance while safeguarding their national interests within the broader global geopolitical landscape.²

Strategically, the relationship has deepened through discussions on security cooperation, counterterrorism efforts, and shared concerns regarding regional stability. China has expressed interest in Iran's geopolitical positioning, especially within the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), viewing Iran as a crucial gateway to the Middle East and beyond. Furthermore, Iran perceives China as a potential ally to counterbalance Western influence, particularly amid tensions with the United States.³

However, these relations face complexities and challenges. The imposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran has influenced China's engagements, leading to a cautious

1 Nazanin Karimimakhsoos, "Iran's Role In China's Energy Supply," *İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi Dış Ticaret Dergisi*, 2023, Cilt 1, Sayı 3 pp. 125-129

2 Maria (Mary) Papageorgiou, Mohammad Eslami and Paulo Afonso B. Duarte, "A 'Soft' Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony", *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, pp. 77-83, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/23477970231152008> accessed on 9.12.2023; also see "Xi holds talks with Iranian president, eyeing new progress in ties", <https://english.news.cn/20230215/f9b61d15caa04ccaaf46fc39b2ab9f44/c.html>

3 Przemysław OSIEWICZ, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Implications for Iran-China Relations," *Przegląd Strategiczny*, 2018, Issue 11, p. 229. <https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/ps/article/view/16700>

approach to protect its broader global interests. Additionally, regional dynamics and evolving geopolitical scenarios, including the changing power dynamics in the Middle East and Asia, shape the nature and trajectory of the China-Iran relationship.

A Brief History of Sino-Iranian Relations

China and Iran, rooted in ancient civilizations, shape their interactions and leadership perspectives based on shared cultural pride and a perceived victimization by Western powers. Their historical narratives reflect an unjust international system dominated by the West, challenging their regimes' legitimacy amid notions of limited sovereignty and universal human rights.⁴ Once influential, both nations faced semi-colonial status: Iran's division into "zones of influence" by imperial powers contrasted China's defeats by Western powers.⁵ The Chinese communist regime, established in 1949, encountered prolonged US-led sanctions. Iran, influenced by the UK and US, saw Western interventions shaping its politics, leading many Iranians to attribute the flaws of the Pahlavi regime to Western powers. Similarly, China used US-led sanctions to portray the West as adversaries. Pahlavi-era Iran had limited ties with China due to US pressure, although the Shah aimed for closer relations to assert an independent foreign policy. Mutual concerns about Soviet actions prompted Tehran and Beijing to explore cooperation. However, the Islamic Republic initially distrusted China, viewing it as a potentially exploitative great power.⁶

Mao Zedong's successor, Late Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hua Guofeng's meeting the Shah before Iran's regime collapse strained ties with Ayatollah Khomeini.⁷ However, China swiftly recognized the new Islamic Republic⁸ and bolstered relations during the Iran-Iraq War, selling arms and

4 John Calabrese, "China and Iran: Partners Perfectly Mismatched," *Manuscript*, August 18, 2006, Middle East Institute, p.2

5 Fan Hongda, "China's Policy Options towards Iran," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, pp. 47-48

6 Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012. https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html.

7 Fan Hongda, op.cit., also see John W. Garver, *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 59.

8 Kulsoom Belal, "China-Iran Relations: Prospects and Complexities," *Perspectives*, 2020, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2020), p.49, table URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/polipers.17.2.0047>

empathizing with Iran's isolation.⁹ Shared revolutionary backgrounds against pro-Western regimes aligned their anti-Western stance.¹⁰ China sought regional influence, Iran needed arms amid its conflicts.¹¹ Despite Khomeini's non-aligned foreign policy, Iran pragmatically cooperated with China due to isolation.¹² China's non-expansionist history in Iran, technology provision, and disregard for Iran's actions abroad fostered the relationship. Post-1988, both countries shifted towards pragmatism from revolutionary ideals amid US isolation. Cooperation on arms, energy, and diplomatic fronts deepened, resisting Western pressures on human rights.¹³

From 1992, China's economic growth was accelerated, turning it into a net oil importer by 1993, augmenting Iran's importance due to its energy resources.¹⁴ Simultaneously, the US enforced "dual containment" against Iran and Iraq, fostering Iran's isolation and China's need for energy and stronger global ties. Following the discovery of Iran's uranium enrichment program in 2002, Western withdrawals from Iran and increased pressure on the country created new opportunities for Chinese involvement in Iran's domestic market and energy sector. Consequently, Chinese-Iranian relations matured, with China becoming Iran's top trading partner by 2007. To date, This pattern of close cooperation remained intact despite leadership change, emphasizing internal stability and a global economic strategy, thereby fostering deepening ties with Iran amid reduced emphasis on relations with the West.¹⁵

9 Hooman PEIMANI, "China and Iran: Energy Security Cooperation, but not Much More," *East Asian Policy*, p. 129; Seyed Reza Miraskari, Seyed, Komail Tayebi and Mohammad Vaez Barzani, An Analysis of International Outsourcing in Iran-China Trade Relations, *Journal of Money and Economy*, Volume 8, No.1, Winter 2013, p.121-122

10 Nabipour, Pourya (2021) "Iran and China: Political and Economic Aspects of the Strategic Relationship." *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 8, 61-77. <https://doi.org/10.29202/up/8/7>

11 William Van Kemenade, "Iran's Relations With China and the West: Cooperation and Confrontation in Asia," November 2009, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20091100_cdsp_paper_kemenade_iran.pdf; for a detailed account of Sino-Iranian Military Cooperation, see Vahid Ghorbani, Mostafa Pakdel Majd and Mehrdad Alipour, "An Analysis of China's Military Diplomacy towards Iran", https://irfajournal.csr.ir/article_145358_c6417b6cd40b344a8f889c734debd077.pdf

12 Mohsen Sahriatinia, "Iran-China Relations: An Overview of Critical Factors," *IRANIAN REVIEW of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Winter 2011, pp. 57-85, <https://www.isrjournals.com/images/pdf/3-Shariatinia.pdf>.

13 Will Green, Taylore Roth, "China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership," *Staff Report*, June 28, 2021 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/China-Iran_Relations.pdf

14 James Tang, "With the grain or against the grain? Energy security and Chinese foreign policy in the Hu Jintao era", https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3629&context=soss_researchp.3

15 Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, op.cit.

Background of the Sino-Iranian 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement

The leaked draft of Sino-Iranian 25-year deal, which caught worldwide attention in July 2020, belies its origins, traced back to its initial declaration in 2016 during President Xi Jinping's official visit to Tehran. Its fruition underwent a protracted process of deliberation and negotiation, hampered notably by the abrupt disruption caused by Washington's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord and subsequent reinstatement of sanctions against Iran, leading to a complex and protracted negotiation phase between the two nations.¹⁶

This negotiation trajectory undoubtedly faced complexities aggravated by the abrupt shift caused by Washington's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement, prompting the resumption of sanctions against Iran since 2018. Nevertheless, discussions between Iran and China gained momentum anew, propelled by escalating tensions between the United States and China. Beijing, seeking avenues to counter what it perceives as American coercive tactics, notably the extraterritorial sanctions imposed on Iran, moved to expedite negotiations with Tehran.¹⁷

The recent revelation and emphasis on the 25-year strategic Agreement between the two nations pivot less on the evolving dynamics between Tehran and Beijing and more on the rapidly deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing. China's strategic recalibration seeks spheres where it can wield influence, and Iran emerges as a pivotal opportunity within this geopolitical chessboard.¹⁸ Some western scholars believed that from the standpoint of China, the potential signing of such an agreement holds significant commercial significance, geared toward securing enduring advantages for Chinese enterprises. This includes strategic access to oil field development and cost-efficient energy imports. Chinese tactics often involve capitalizing on political vulnerabilities to secure favorable conditions. In this instance, leveraging the coronavirus crisis, ongoing sanctions against Iran, and Iran's substantial investment requirements serve China's objective of securing preferential terms for its companies over an extended period.¹⁹

16 Sima Shine, "Eyal Propper and Bat Chen Druyan Feldman, Iran and China: On the Way to a Long-Term Strategic Agreement?" Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25517> Accessed: 01-09-2023

17 Alex Vatanka, Making sense of the Iran-China strategic agreement, April 26, 2021 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/making-sense-iran-china-strategic-agreement>

18 Ibid.

19 Sima Shine, "Eyal Propper and Bat Chen Druyan Feldman, op.cit.

The Sino-Iranian 25-year deal emerges against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical landscapes and strategic imperatives for both nations. Historically, China and Iran share centuries-old cultural and economic ties along the ancient Silk Road. However, their contemporary Agreement gained momentum due to converging interests and geopolitical dynamics.²⁰

For China, the deal aligns with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²¹, seeking to expand its economic reach and secure vital energy resources.²² Iran, possessing abundant oil and gas reserves, becomes a crucial component in China's quest for energy security amidst global competition. Moreover, as the United States imposed sanctions on Iran, China found an opportunity to deepen ties, benefit from discounted oil prices, and invest in Iran's infrastructure and technology sectors.²³

Iran, on the other hand, facing economic pressures due to sanctions, sought international partners willing to engage despite US-led restrictions. This prompted Iran to move towards China, finding in Beijing a potential ally capable of providing economic stability and technological advancements while diminishing reliance on traditional Western partners.²⁴

Simultaneously, the geopolitical context played a crucial role. Both nations found themselves at odds with the United States, albeit for different reasons. China faces growing tensions with the US over trade, technology, and geopolitical influence²⁵, seeking alliances to counterbalance American dominance. Iran, on the other hand, confronts US sanctions and regional challenges, prompting it to seek strategic alliances that defy American pressures.²⁶

20 Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, "The Impact and Implications of China's Growing Influence in the Middle East," <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-impact-and-implications-of-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/> accessed 11.12.2023

21 For Iran's complex feelings about China's Belt and Road Initiative, see Mohsen Shariatina & Hamidreza Azizi (2019): "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear, *Journal of Contemporary China*," DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2019.159410

22 Yu Hong/余虹, "一带一路" 与中伊签署《全面合作计划》 /On Belt, One Road and Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement Signed between China and Iran, <https://nus.edu.sg/newshub/news/2021/2021-04/2021-04-27/AGREEMENT-lhzb-27apr-p10.pdf>, erişim: 2.12.2023

23 Jacopo Scita, "China-Iran: A Complex, Seesaw Relationship," *Commentary*, 8 February 2019, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/commentary_scita_08.02.2018.pdf

24 Nasser Hadian, "Iran & China: An Iranian View", <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/27/iran-china-iranian-view> accessed 9.12.2023

25 Barbara Lippert, Volker Perthes, "Strategic Rivalry between United States and China," <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020RP04/> accessed 6.12.2023

26 Akmal, Dawi, "US Concerned as Iran Maneuvers Diplomatically Around Globe", <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-concerned-as-iran-maneuvers-diplomatically-around-globe/7137639.html>

This convergence of economic interests, geopolitical shifts, and mutual grievances with the US culminated in the Sino-Iranian 25-year agreement. It symbolizes not just an economic collaboration but a strategic alliance aiming to recalibrate regional dynamics,²⁷ challenge Western dominance, and assert both nations' influence on the global stage.

The Rationale for Concluding the Agreement

The 25-year deal between China and Iran, as one of the results of Iran's 'look East' approach,²⁸ holds multifaceted motives for both nations, deeply intertwined with geopolitical and strategic considerations, and China perceives the Agreement as a means to counterbalance and contain the growing US influence, particularly within the Middle East region. By fostering a strategic Agreement with Iran, China aims to limit US dominance and shift the focal point of conflict from Southeast Asia to the Middle East.

The deal allows China to bolster its economic and trade interests, securing resources and markets amid a changing global landscape. It provides stability and access to Iran's resources, particularly crucial amid increasing tensions with the US. Considering Biden's policies, China is treading cautiously and strategically. It anticipates potential US containment strategies and aims to pre-emptively secure allies and resources, fostering strategic ties in the Middle East to counterbalance US influence globally.²⁹

Iran faces severe economic challenges, compounded by US sanctions. Partnering with China offers economic respite, tapping into China's extensive trade networks and potentially alleviating the economic crisis exacerbated by US sanctions. Iran sees China as a strong ally against US pressure³⁰, especially concerning the revival of the nuclear deal. The agreement with China signifies a strategic alignment to withstand US sanctions and mitigate the economic fallout. Iran's engagement with China aligns with Iranian Supreme Leader's directives to look towards the East. This shift is a response to fading expectations from

27 For the Agreement' implications for the region, see Areeja Syed, Adil Khan and Muhammad Ejaz, "Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Relations: Implications for the Region", *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* April-June 2022, Vol. 3, No. 2, [http://dx.doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022\(3-II\)50](http://dx.doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022(3-II)50), p. 537-548

28 Fan Hongda (2022) China-Iran Relations from the Perspective of Tehran's Look East Approach, *Asian Affairs*, 53:1, 51-67, DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2022.2029053

29 RASANAH, "the Iran -China 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Challenges and Prospects," *Position Paper*, <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/position-estimate/the-iran-china-25-year-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-challenges-and-prospects/>

30 Will Green, Taylore Roth, op.cit.

the Biden administration and the need to diversify diplomatic and economic alliances beyond Europe.³¹

In essence, the agreement is a convergence of interests between Iran and China, driven by a desire to counter US influence, secure economic stability, and foster strategic alliances in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics, particularly within the context of Biden's foreign policy and US-China rivalry.³²

Iran and the People's Republic of China uphold a relationship marked by positivity, yet their political cooperation is hindered by differing ideologies. A sustained alliance between a theocratic republic and a communist state seems improbable, yet both persist in cooperation, fostering increasingly complex bilateral ties. This pragmatic alignment stems from Western pressure and economic necessities. Viewing the U.S. presence in Asia as a threat, both nations work to limit American influence across the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, shaping their partnership based on shared security concerns.³³

The Agreement's Benefits for Both China and Iran

When taking a close look at the leaked draft document, the salient points of the Agreement encompass the following significant provisions:

1. Ensuring a continuous supply of oil to China over 25 years at subsidized rates, contingent upon Beijing's substantial investment of \$400 billion across diverse sectors within Iran, notably in infrastructure development encompassing railways and ports like Chabahar and others.
2. Facilitating a specialized mechanism to facilitate financial transactions between the two nations, conducted in the Chinese yuan currency, aimed at aiding traders engaged in bilateral commerce.
3. Exploring the prospect of establishing oil storage facilities within Chinese territories, allowing for stockpiling or potential re-exportation without tax obligations.
4. Collaborative efforts in intelligence sharing and the enhancement of information infrastructure tailored for a 5G telecommunication network.
5. Strategic endeavors directed towards positioning Iran as the central hub of the Silk Road's trade route within the Middle East, diverting its path from the Arabian Peninsula.

31 Sajjad Talebi, "Iran-China Relations: An Iranian Perspective," <https://www.twai.it/journal/tnote-29/>

32 Rasanah, op.cit.

33 Przemysław Osiewicz, op.cit. p. 225.

6. Cooperative initiatives alongside Russia to establish connectivity between the Sea of Oman and the Arabian Gulf with northern Europe through Azerbaijan and Russia, as well as linking the southern Iranian coast with the Baltic Sea.
7. Proposal for the construction of gas and oil pipelines originating from southern Iran and extending to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, culminating in connection points at the Syrian port of Baniyas and the Lebanese port of Tripoli.
8. Collaboration encompassing military, defense, and security realms, encompassing elements such as training programs, research initiatives, and joint endeavors pertaining to strategic concerns.³⁴

Judging from the contents of the Agreement, *we can conclude that its implementation is poised to grant China several strategic advantages.* Primarily, it will bolster China's geopolitical influence in West and Central Asia, expanding its political footprint within the Middle East. This move serves as a counter to US containment efforts aimed at constraining China's global ascendance over the long haul, prompting comparisons to a contemporary Cold War scenario. Furthermore, within the scope of its "peaceful rise policy," China stands to achieve substantial economic gains through increased investments in significant economic projects and ventures.³⁵

Conversely, the deal presents Beijing with expanded market opportunities in Iran and neighboring regions, facilitating joint ventures and granting access to Central Asian markets while streamlining routes to Europe for its products. Moreover, the deal holds the potential to mitigate geopolitical risks for China's economy by diversifying its sources of oil within the Middle East. Indeed, recent trends in Iran's economic landscape demonstrate a notable shift, with China emerging as Iran's foremost oil purchaser and primary trading partner, surpassing the United States.³⁶ Currently, approximately 60 percent of China's oil needs are met from this region. The deal promises a consistent supply of oil and

34 Lucille Greer and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, "Last Among Equals: The China-Iran Partnership in a Regional Context," *Occasional Paper Series* No. 38 | September 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/MEP_200831_OCC%2038%20v3%20%281%29.pdf, erişim.1.12.2023, p. 1, pp.23-37

35 Mohammadbagher Forough, "In Between The Us And China", *İRAM Yayınları*, p.9, https://iramcenter.org/uploads/files/Iran_between_the_US_and_China.pdf

36 Zulfarğar Ahmed, Muhammed İsmail, Atta Ui Rehman Malik, "China-Iran Relations: Emerging Challenges For United States Of America In The Middle East" https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370757362_CHINA-Iran_Relations_Emerging_Challenges_For_United_States_Of_America_In_The_Middle_East

petrochemicals at reduced prices. Additionally, should Iran develop oil depots on Chinese territory, this could further diminish China's shipping costs, adding to its economic advantages.³⁷

As far as the benefits for Iran are concerned, the deal yields substantial gains for Iran, particularly in the short term, by securing a robust ally in the global arena, enabling a degree of equilibrium amid US attempts at isolation. Primarily, Iran benefits from China's support as a significant participant in the nuclear deal, leveraging this to expedite negotiations with the United States towards sanction removal, crucial for its embattled economy. Economically, Iran is heavily reliant on Chinese support, with Beijing standing as Tehran's primary trade partner for the past decade. Ever since China became a net oil importer in early 1990, the economic cooperation between China and Iran has deepened.³⁸ China has expanded its engagement with Iran's oil industry, extending beyond crude oil procurement to substantial involvement in both upstream and downstream production processes through considerable investment. The predominant focus of China's substantial commitments lies in "upstream development," denoting activities related to the exploration and extraction of crude oil.³⁹ Since 2005, the collaborative efforts between China and Iran have culminated in the signing of seven prominent upstream agreements within the energy sector, engaging all three preminent state-owned energy enterprises of China: the China National Petroleum Corporations (CNPC), Sinopec, and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation.⁴⁰

To give examples in terms of sector-wise, in the realm of bilateral trade, China predominantly imports primary products from Iran, including but not limited to oil, petrochemicals, natural gas condensate, minerals, construction stone, carpets, dried fruits, and saffron. Conversely, China exports machinery parts, tires, railway steel rails, steel products, air conditioners, computer components, motors, electrical equipment, chemical dyes, glass, and related goods to Iran. This

37 Rasanah, op.cit.

38 HU Shuhan / 胡纾寒, 钟帅 / ZHONGShuai 沈 镭 / SHENLei 薛静静 / XUE Jingjing / 美国全面制裁伊朗对中国能源安全的影响与对策建议 / The influence of the United States's comprehensive sanctions against Iran on China's energy security and the related countermeasure, 中国矿业, 第 27 卷第 10 期 2018 年 10 月/China Mining Magazine, Vol.27, No.10 Oct. 2018, p.55

39 Ibid.

40 Peter Mackenzie, "A Closer Look at China-Iran Relations", *Roundtable Report*, September 2010, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2010/D0023622.A3.pdf>, Manochehr Dorraj and Carrie L. Currier, "Lubricated With Oil: Iran-China Relations in a Changing World", <https://mepc.org/journal/lubricated-oil-iran-china-relations-changing-world> accessed on 11.12.2023

export spectrum encompasses direct exports from China to Iran as well as exports associated with engineering contracting projects.⁴¹

Regarding mutual investments, as of the end of 2015, China's direct investment stock in Iran amounted to \$3.915 billion, while Iran's cumulative actual investment in China reached \$1.11 billion. Infrastructure development, energy, automotive and motorcycle manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism stand as the primary sectors for Chinese investment in Iran. Key Chinese direct investment projects in Iran include the establishment of Iran Haier Company, a joint venture formed by Haier Group in the Isfahan Industrial Park, investment by Suzhou Valve Factory to establish a joint valve production plant in Iran, and the joint assembly of metro passenger cars by Northern Industries and Changchun Bus Factory in collaboration with Tehran Urban and Suburban Railway Company. Moreover, a substantial portion of Chinese investments enters the Iranian market through financing and loans provided by the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank for Sino-Iranian cooperative projects. These encompass upstream development projects undertaken by China National Petroleum Corporation utilizing the "buy-back" model for oil and gas, as well as non-oil and gas engineering projects structured under the EP (Engineering-Procurement) and EPC (Engineering-Procurement-Construction) models.⁴²

In the realm of engineering contracting, Sino-Iranian cooperation encompasses a broad spectrum spanning energy, transportation, steel, non-ferrous metals, power generation, chemicals, mining, telecommunications, automotive, motorcycle assembly, and home appliances. Several collaborative projects have significantly contributed to Iran's economic development, fostering enduring benefits for its people and garnering favorable local reputations. For instance, the Alarak Power Plant constructed by Dongfang Electric Group stands as Iran's most crucial power generation facility, surpassing local standards in operational efficiency. Similarly, China Water Resources and Hydropower Construction Group's project, the Taleghan Hydroelectric Station in Iran, earned widespread acclaim from the government and industry insiders for its high-speed, high-quality execution.⁴³

41 Lu Jin / 陆瑾, "一带一路" 视角下中国与伊朗的经济合作 / Economic Cooperation Between China and Iran from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative, *阿拉伯世界研究*, 2016年第6期 / *Arab World Studies*, No.6, 2016, pp. 24-25

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid

In 2018, the China National Machinery Industry Corporation inked an extensive contract valued at US\$845 million. This agreement aimed to construct a railway network connecting Hamedan and Sanandaj cities in western Iran to Tehran, with an anticipated completion date slated for 2022. Additionally, reports indicated that China extended a substantial loan amounting to US\$1.9 billion specifically earmarked for the development of a high-speed railway project spanning from Tehran to Iran's Isfahan province. The construction of this ambitious railway initiative involves collaboration with China Railway Group, signifying China's significant involvement in Iran's infrastructural development within the transportation sector.⁴⁴ Other key project such as the Tehran Metro project, jointly undertaken by CITIC Group, Northern Industries, and China National Technical Import & Export Corporation, involving participation from over 50 large Chinese state-owned enterprises, not only provided immense convenience to the Iranian populace but also offered firsthand experience of China's subway construction prowess. Additionally, China Nonferrous Group's executed and pending engineering project contracts in Iran surpass \$4 billion, achieving multiple pioneering milestones and laying the groundwork for Iran's nonferrous metallurgical industry. Despite Western sanctions on Iran, dozens of oil and gas engineering service and supporting enterprises such as CNPC, Sinopec, and CNOOC maintained uninterrupted long-term collaborations with Iran in oil field risk exploration, development, engineering services, refinery expansions, and renovations.⁴⁵

Furthermore, telecommunication equipment and technical services provided by companies like Huawei, ZTE, and FiberHome have garnered substantial market share and commendation in Iran. Presently, Chinese enterprises have over 50 major ongoing projects in Iran, with accumulated contract values surpassing 100 billion RMB. Among these, 40 projects are in the realm of engineering contracting, amounting to approximately 60 billion RMB in contract value.⁴⁶

The facts and figures provided above underscores Iran's significant dependence on China within the realm of global trade. Since 2015, more than 20% of Iran's external trade has been conducted exclusively with China. Notably, up until 2017, Iran's export share to China mirrored its import share from the same source. This symbiotic relationship was shaped amid rigorous international

44 Angela Stanzel, "China's path to geopolitics: case study on China's Iran policy at the intersection of regional interests and global power rivalry," <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/79066>

45 陆瑾, Lu Jin, op.cit.

46 Ibid.

economic sanctions, resulting in Iran's financial seclusion from global networks. Consequently, the predominant mode of transactions involved cash transactions or reciprocal exchanges. The 2017 withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, further constrained Iran's trade opportunities, fostering an increase in trade volumes with countries willing to circumvent imposed sanctions. Many of Iran's domestic products heavily rely on input sourcing from international origins. Post-2017, Iran's heightened reliance on Chinese consumer goods emerges as a pragmatic response to severe international sanctions impeding its domestic production capacity. Essentially, Iran's dependency on China arises from its incapacity to domestically produce, compelling reliance on foreign acquisition, with China standing out as one of the few accessible suppliers for Iran.⁴⁷ In other words, the nature of Iran and China's interactions has predominantly favored China's interests over Iran's, with the shared similarities providing greater advantages to the Chinese side. Moreover, Iran's direct opposition to the United States in the Persian Gulf and West Asia has presented a unique and advantageous opportunity for China.⁴⁸

This kind of economic alliance has deepened amidst international sanctions against Iran, with China alone accounting for a quarter of Iran's total exports in 2020. The establishment of specialized financial mechanisms between the two nations could further heighten Iran's dependency on China. If China upholds its commitments, Iran stands to gain considerable economic, political, and military advantages in both the short and long term: Despite a decline in bilateral trade from \$52 billion in 2014 to approximately \$20 billion in the 2020/2021 fiscal year due to sanctions and plummeting oil prices, China remains Iran's most vital trade partner. China imported 26 percent of Iran's total exports during this fiscal year, particularly in oil and petrochemicals. Investment in Iran's infrastructure, including the development of Chabahar port and railway construction, holds the promise of augmenting regional trade. These developments position Iran to engage neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Central Asia, attracting international investments post-lifting of US sanctions.⁴⁹

47 Sahand E.P.Faez, 從中東影響歐洲 伊朗在中國政策中之可能角色 / Iran as a Candidate and China's Reach on Europe through the Middle East, 歐亞研究 第十六期 2021.07 / Eurasian Studies Quarterly, No.16

48 Ali Omid, Ehsan Fallahi and Kourosh Ziabari, "Analyzing the Contrast between Chinese Economic Pragmatism and Iranian "Look to East" Optimism", *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, December 2021, P.302, <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/IJCS/article/view/36512>

49 Ranasah, op.cit.

Iran anticipates enhancing its role in international transit trade by joining the Belt and Road initiative.⁵⁰ Plans include the creation of international corridors for goods passage from Asia to Europe through Iranian ports, Azerbaijan, and Russia, potentially via high-speed trains.⁵¹

It is believed that the high degree of complementarity in the economic sphere between China and Iran will serve as the foundation and driving force for continued cooperation. China's status as having the world's largest foreign exchange reserves provides robust support for Chinese investment in Iran. In a new scenario free from sanctions and constraints, both China and Iran will establish new intersections and points of convergence in their interests. China stands as the most suitable partner for Iran in developing infrastructure and advancing industrialization. This collaboration can assist Iran in enhancing its industrial technological capabilities and achieving upgrades in industrial sectors. Chinese enterprises demonstrate considerable strength in equipment manufacturing, with the production of over 200 industrial products ranking at the forefront globally while maintaining a price advantage of roughly one-third compared to similar products worldwide. Beyond manufacturing, China also excels in numerous fields such as telecommunications, high-speed rail, aerospace, electronic technology, satellite positioning systems, and nuclear energy, boasting internationally advanced levels of expertise.⁵²

China represents Iran's largest and most stable market for crude oil exports. The increasing demand for clean energy will likely make China a crucial potential market for Iran's natural gas exports. China's capacity to absorb Iran's petrochemical products is unparalleled by other nations. Annually, China imports a substantial volume of around 3 to 4 million tons of methanol alone. Iran exports significant quantities of iron, copper ore, and other minerals to China. Long-term cooperation exists between both nations in the development of aluminum, gold, and other mineral resources. This Agreement reflects a mutually beneficial relationship based on economic complementarity and strategic interests between

50 Fa Hongda / 范鸿达, 中国在伊朗推进“一带一路”战略倡议的政治环境与因应 / China's "Belt and Road Initiative" in Iran: political environment and coping style, 西亚非洲 2016 年第 2 期 / West Asia and Africa, No.2, 2016. pp. 59-64

51 Lu Ji / 陆瑾, op.cit.p. 22

52 Lu Jin / 陆瑾, 历史与现实视阈下的中伊合作: 基于伊朗人对“一带一路”认知的解读 / Sino-Iranian Cooperation from Historical and Present Perspectives: Based on Iranians' Understanding of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative, 西亚非洲 2015 年第 6 期 / West Asia and Africa, No.6, 2015, p. 64

China and Iran, facilitating technological exchange, industrial development, and resource utilization.⁵³

Challenges in the Implementation of the Agreement

US Sanctions and Nuclear Deal Withdrawal

Although it looks quite perfect on the paper, the realization of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement faces formidable impediments, significantly impacting the potential benefits for both nations. Foremost among these hurdles are the persistent sanctions against Iran, posing a substantial barrier to fostering economic ties and deterring prospective Chinese investments.⁵⁴ The lifting of sanctions remains a crucial prerequisite for stimulating Chinese interest in engaging with Iran's economic landscape. Until then, the prospects for substantial Chinese investments in Iran remain subdued.⁵⁵

Moreover, the ongoing uncertainties surrounding the Vienna talks aimed at reviving the 2015 Nuclear Deal constitute another considerable impediment to the successful implementation of the Iran-China 25-year agreement. Iran's nuclear program and the subsequent withdrawal of the United States from the agreement have had profound ramifications on Iran's political economy. These developments have disrupted collaborative initiatives between Tehran and Beijing, further exacerbating the obstacles to materializing joint projects. Hence, the protraction of uncertainties in the nuclear negotiations might significantly impede the progress of the 25-year accord between Iran and China.⁵⁶

Ukraine Crisis

The geopolitical ramifications stemming from Russia's incursion into Ukraine pose potential ramifications for the Iran-China agreement's implementation. The enduring crisis in Ukraine holds vast implications for multiple nations, including Iran, thereby potentially influencing Tehran's political, economic, and energy dynamics, particularly in its engagement with China. The enduring implications

53 Ibid.

54 Jacopo Scita. 28 Dec 2021, China-Iran relations *from: Routledge Handbook ON China-Middle East Relations*, p.171, Routledge Accessed on: 25 Oct 2023 <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003034520-14>

55 Umud Shokri, "Obstacles and opportunities for closer Iranian-Chinese economic cooperation" <https://www.mei.edu/publications/obstacles-and-opportunities-closer-iranian-chinese-economic-cooperation> accessed 11.12.2023

56 Yasir Rashid, "The Latest Status of the 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement Between Iran and China," <https://iramcenter.org/en/the-latest-status-of-the-25-year-comprehensive-cooperation-agreement-between-iran-and-china-737>, accessed 2.12.2023

of the Ukraine crisis may introduce both opportunities and challenges that could significantly shape Iran's future relations with China in various spheres over the long term.⁵⁷

Public Opinions in Iran

Public opinion in Iran and different approaches of influential figures in political and academic circles pose serious challenges for the Iranian government to implement the Agreement.

From the official perspective, the Agreement between China and Iran underscores pragmatic considerations shaping their bilateral support. President Rouhani's spokesperson, Ali Rabii, acknowledges the plan's pivotal role in strengthening Sino-Iranian relations, the emphasis on "this plan showcases the failure of US efforts to isolate Iran and disrupt its global connections" illuminates the influential role of US-Iran relations in Iran's strategic approach towards China. This indicates a reactive dimension in Iran's policy decisions vis-à-vis China, primarily directed at dismantling the US blockade rather than exclusively bolstering Sino-Iranian cooperation.⁵⁸

Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif, on the other hand, clarified to parliament that the pact's signing does not abandon the diplomatic principle of "neither East nor West" but represents a strategic choice considering prevailing circumstances and global power shifts. He underscored Iran's enduring economic struggle against US-led economic sanctions to allay concerns among lawmakers regarding Iran's alignment with China. Contrary to Rabii's implicit stance, Zarif's statement explicitly reaffirms Iran's current pursuit of Sino-Iranian cooperation as pragmatic, reiterating the diplomatic principle of avoiding alignment with specific geopolitical blocs.⁵⁹

According to Gholamreza Ansari, the Economic Diplomacy Deputy at the Iranian Foreign Ministry, the 25-year Iran-China cooperation agreement extends far beyond the realm of mere economic collaboration. Ansari also clarified that the final version of the agreement would encompass not only economic facets but also incorporate cooperation between various judicial and parliamentary

57 Ibid.

58 <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/>

59 "Nothing to Hide about Iran-China 25-Year Deal: FM Zarif," <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/07/05/2299935/nothing-to-hide-about-iran-china-25-year-deal-fm-zarif>; also see <https://www.mashregnews.ir/news/>

entities from both nations. Additionally, Ansari highlighted a significant shift in trade dynamics, noting that the Chinese yuan had replaced the dollar in Iran-China transactions, including the trade of oil. He emphasized that despite global dynamics, China remained a prominent purchaser of Iranian oil.⁶⁰

Hesameddin Ashena, an adviser to President Rouhani, characterizing the accord as emblematic of “diplomatic success.” Ashena emphasized the significance of a nation’s strength lying in its capacity to forge alliances and participate in coalitions rather than being relegated to isolation. This sentiment underscores the strategic importance attributed to the agreement as a testament to Iran’s diplomatic prowess, showcasing its ability to engage constructively on the international stage through collaborative initiatives and partnerships.⁶¹

In short, we can conclude that these Iranian government officials’ perspectives on the Iran-China agreement converge on strategic pragmatism but differ in emphasis. While Ali Rabii’s stance emphasizes countering US isolation and enhancing Sino-Iranian ties reactively, Zarif’s view supports strategic alignment without forsaking diplomatic neutrality, addressing economic concerns. While Gholamreza Ansari extends the deal’s scope beyond economics, highlighting comprehensive collaboration and currency shift, Hesameddin Ashena underscores diplomatic success through alliances, highlighting Iran’s engagement over isolation.

However, harsh remarks of some well-known Iranian politicians are rather worrisome for the government. For instance, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has publicly articulated his stance regarding the purported clandestine 25-year agreement between Iran and China, stating unequivocally that the Iranian populace would not acknowledge such an accord. His statement emphasized the imperative of transparency and public disclosure concerning any contractual engagements with foreign nations. Ahmadinejad’s remarks were prompted by ambiguous reports surrounding a potential extensive cooperation pact with China, with no explicit elucidation of its specifics or the current stage of its development. This astute maneuver by Ahmadinejad bears the hallmark of a shrewd populist, leveraging the opportunity to project himself as a champion

60 “Iran-China Strategic Partnership Wider Than Economy, Say Officials,” <https://old.iranintl.com/en/world/iran-china-strategic-partnership-wider-economy-say-officials> accessed on: 2.12.2023

61 “China and Iran sign 25-year strategic cooperation agreement,” <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210327-china-and-iran-sign-25-year-strategic-cooperation-agreement>, accessed on 2.12.2023

of Iranian national sovereignty while capitalizing on the lack of transparency surrounding the alleged agreement.⁶²

Ali Mutahhari, a prominent figure in Iranian politics and a former member of multiple parliamentary sessions, garnered support from intellectuals, students, and the middle class in Iran for his boldness in addressing internal regime issues. His scrutiny of the legitimacy of collaboration with China included deliberate amplification of China's policies toward its Muslim population, raising apprehensions about the credibility of the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan. Motahhari's commentary depicted concerns about "Chinese authoritarianism," intensifying existing fears within Iranian society of potential subordination to China or jeopardizing Iran's interests. This narrative could impede the formation of a favorable public opinion toward Sino-Iranian cooperation.⁶³

Abbas Abdi, a respected reformist political activist and journalist within Iran's intellectual circles, openly opposed the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan. He advocated for engaging in such agreements with multiple nations, cautioning against the inherent risk of Iran becoming overly reliant on China by exclusively committing to this Agreement. Abdi highlighted the current government's pragmatic motives behind the prolonged cooperation deal with China, attributing it to Iran's dire financial circumstances.⁶⁴

Given their prominent positions in Iranian politics, the government might find the outspoken criticisms from these politicians concerning. These perspectives underscore apprehensions regarding Iran's susceptibility to Chinese influence or dependency stemming from the exclusive nature of the cooperation agreement. These remarks can potentially create concerns within the government due to their impact on public perception, diplomatic relationships, and domestic stability. Such criticisms, especially when voiced by influential figures, may challenge the government's authority, disrupt its diplomatic efforts, or exacerbate internal tensions.

Some prominent Iranian scholars also expressed their concerns in relation to the deal. For instance, Tehran University professor Sadegh Zibakalam's scrutiny of the China-Iran 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan emphasizes its delicate

62 "An Iran-China 25-Year Agreement: Wishful Thinking Or A 'Lion-Dragon Pact'?" <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-china-25-year-agreement-reality-or-fiction/30696729.html>, accessed on 2.12.2023

63 <https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/> accessed on accessed on: 2.12.2023

64 Ibid.

standing within Iranian society and the pervasive opposition it encounters. He explicitly attributes this resistance to a fundamental deficit in trust towards Beijing, underscoring that educated Iranians, in contrast to many government officials who hold Russia and China in high esteem, harbor significant mistrust toward both nations. Zibakalam's remarks not only convey skepticism about the long-term collaboration between Iran and China but also underscore a deep societal distrust toward the government, indicating insufficient popular backing for the strategic cooperation between the two countries.⁶⁵

Another Iranian economist, Hossein Raghfar believes that the existing managerial framework in the nation appears ill-prepared to engage in equitable negotiations with China. Consequently, a call for public discourse on the Iran-China agreement is imperative, facilitating comprehensive analysis by domain specialists to scrutinize its multifaceted aspects and identify inherent shortcomings. Regrettably, the dearth of specific details within the agreement presents challenges, as it primarily comprises broad outlines encapsulated in a memorandum. Substantive deficiencies within this memorandum warrant scholarly attention, prompting an examination of its intricacies and potential drawbacks. His stance, rooted in interests rather than strategic alignment, reflects a pragmatic perspective.⁶⁶

To sum up the views expressed by these Iranian scholars, it is quite obvious that Sadegh Zibakalam emphasizes societal mistrust toward China, highlighting a lack of public support for the Iran-China deal due to widespread skepticism. This contrasts with Hossein Raghfar's focus on managerial inadequacies and the need for transparent discourse to address substantive deficiencies in the agreement. Both underscore skepticism, Zibakalam societal, Raghfar managerial, highlighting the need for public engagement. Their common ground lies in addressing deficiencies within the Iran-China agreement from different perspectives – societal trust and managerial competence.

Conclusion

The assessment of the Iran-China agreement portrays a complex and intricate scenario that encompasses diverse rationales and envisaged benefits for both participating nations. Within this comprehensive discourse, the fundamental

65 <https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/>

66 "Iran has undeniable capabilities for economic development," <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2020/10/15/636463/Economic-recovery-prognosis-for-Iran>

underpinnings driving the conclusion of the agreement were extensively explored, accentuating the strategic reasoning that supports the perceived advantages foreseen by China and Iran. This evaluative process has shed light on the multifaceted nature of the pact, delineating its potential ramifications across various domains.

Central to these deliberations was an in-depth exploration of China's substantial commitments and investments within Iran. This highlighted the profound economic and geopolitical implications intertwined with the agreement. The envisaged benefits, spanning economic growth, technological advancements, and infrastructural development, underscore the depth of the engagement between the two nations and the intended reciprocation of gains.

Nonetheless, amidst these promises lie formidable challenges that cast shadows of uncertainty over the agreement's realization. Foremost among these hurdles are the imposing barriers posed by the persistent imposition of US sanctions on Iran. These sanctions, coupled with the intricacies of navigating geopolitical landscapes marred by conflicts such as the situation in Ukraine, stand as formidable obstacles to the smooth execution of the agreement. The specter of geopolitical tensions looms large, potentially impeding the seamless translation of intentions into concrete actions.

The dichotomy between the Iranian government's optimistic stance and the prevailing apprehensions voiced within academic circles illuminates a stark contrast in perceptions regarding the agreement's implementation. While the government espouses confidence in the accord's potential to bolster Iran's economic prospects and global standing, academia remains entrenched in concerns and reservations. This dichotomy underscores the nuanced and divergent viewpoints that shape the discourse surrounding the agreement, indicating a critical need for a holistic understanding that accommodates these varied perspectives.

In summation, this in-depth analysis serves as a critical lens through which the intricate interplay of diverse factors influencing the feasibility and potential consequences of the Iran-China agreement is elucidated.

Given the challenges posed by the existing US sanctions and mostly negative public opinion in Iran against the Agreement, its implementation will not seem as easy as it is envisaged, largely it will end up as another balancing act of China and Iran in geopolitics in the Middle East.

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