



Possibilities Architects:
Inspiring Ascending Beyond

Policy Report

Strategic Convergence: The Structural Logic of the Iran–China Partnership

December 6, 2025

www.paiab.org

By Reza Nasri

Vice-President for Advocacy and Legal Strategy PAIAB Institute

In an international system undergoing a profound reconfiguration, the strategic convergence between the People's Republic of China and Iran emerges as a cornerstone of the emerging multipolar order. This partnership transcends conventional diplomacy, representing a deep structural alignment forged by parallel historical experiences, congruent threat assessments, and complementary strategic imperatives. The sustained strengthening of this alliance is not a matter of optional policy but a critical necessity for both nations to secure their sovereign interests and reshape the geopolitical landscape.

Worldview Congruence: A Shared Philosophical Foundation

The alliance finds its roots in a fundamental compatibility of worldview and political identity. China's governance model and foreign policy are explicitly predicated on an anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonic doctrine. This perspective, shaped by its own "Century of Humiliation," frames the current international system as one unfairly dominated by Western powers. China's rhetoric and actions consistently advocate for a "community with a shared future for mankind," positing a multipolar system that rejects unilateral dominance and respects civilizational diversity.

This ideology resonates powerfully with the foundational principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian state emanated from the 1979 Revolution, a transformative event defined by its rejection of foreign *Solteh*—a Persian term encapsulating domination, overlordship, and illegitimate imperial control. The revolutionary narrative frames Iran's foreign policy as a continuous struggle for independence, dignity and justice against a hegemonic world order. This shared language of resistance to external coercion and advocacy for a more equitable distribution of global power creates a durable foundation for mutual understanding and political trust. It allows both nations to interpret geopolitical friction as manifestations of a broader systemic contest.

A Mirror of Threats: Symmetry in Security Perceptions

A compelling driver of strategic cooperation is the remarkable symmetry in the security landscapes confronting Beijing and Tehran. Each nation perceives itself as operating within a tightly contested strategic environment, encircled and pressurized by a network of adversarial alliances spearheaded by the United States.

China's primary security concerns are concentrated in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific, particularly the South China Sea. The threat matrix includes an entrenched United States military presence and forward deployment, complemented by regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) that challenge Chinese territorial claims. This military posture is augmented by a strengthening lattice of U.S. alliances with regional states such as Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, including enhanced defense agreements like EDCA. Further complications arise from the internationalization of territorial disputes through legal challenges, the military modernization of neighboring states like Vietnam, and persistent threats to critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), including the strategic chokepoint of the Malacca Strait. The potential for a Taiwan contingency to trigger a wider regional conflagration underscores the acute and interconnected nature of these dangers.

Iran faces a directly analogous threat environment in the terrestrial and maritime theaters of West Asia. The core challenge is the pervasive military and intelligence presence of the United States and its strategic partners in the Persian Gulf and surrounding regions. This is operationalized through comprehensive economic warfare via sanctions, strategic coordination between the U.S. and Israel against Iranian interests, and the fostering of regional security alignments hostile to Tehran, such as the nascent Arab-Israeli normalization blocs. Instability on Iran's borders—from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to Pakistan—creates conduits for terrorism and smuggling. Concurrently, NATO and Western pressure targets Iran's defensive missile and nuclear programs, while persistent foreign cyber and information warfare campaigns seek to undermine state stability.

This mirroring of security dilemmas—where both nations face a common strategic adversary employing similar tools of containment, military pressure, and alliance-building—fosters a unique operational empathy. It establishes a clear, practical basis for intelligence sharing, military dialogue, and coordinated diplomatic responses within forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the United Nations.

Mutual Assistance: The Imperative of Strategic Interdependence

The partnership is built on a clear and powerful logic of mutual strategic need. This connection goes beyond a simple alignment of interests, representing a deep integration where each country addresses vital gaps in the other's strategic framework.

From China's perspective, Iran holds essential value across multiple domains. Geographically, Iran's position is irreplaceable. It acts as the critical overland bridge connecting Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This role establishes Iran as the central corridor for the westward expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly for the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Stability along

this route guarantees a secure and efficient flow of goods and energy across Eurasia. It diminishes dependence on longer, more vulnerable sea lanes.

Economically, Iran serves as a strategic energy reserve and a long-term partner. Possessing some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, Iran provides China with a stable, long-term hydrocarbon supply. This supply can be secured through pipelines and overland routes. Such diversification moves China's import infrastructure away from vulnerable maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. The energy relationship acts as a buffer against global market volatility and potential supply disruptions.

Geopolitically, a resilient and cooperative Iran functions as a natural and powerful counterbalance within West Asia. Other major powers in the Persian Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar, maintain formal military alliances or deep strategic partnerships with the United States. This alignment leaves Iran as the only significant regional power not integrated into the U.S.-led security architecture, making it the sole potential partner for a substantive strategic and military alliance in the area for a power like China. An Iran that can withstand external pressure and assert its regional role complicates and disperses the strategic attention and resources of the United States and its allies. This effectively grants China strategic depth in a region historically dominated by its rivals. By ensuring Iran is not isolated or neutralized, Beijing guarantees itself a pivotal ally whose very presence demands diplomatic consideration from other regional actors, thereby preventing the formation of a monolithic, hostile bloc on its western flank. In essence, Iran acts as a force multiplier for Chinese influence, allowing Beijing to project strategic weight and protect its interests in West Asia without the permanent deployment of substantial military assets.

For Iran, partnership with the People's Republic of China functions as a stabilizing counterweight that bolsters its sovereignty and strategic autonomy in a world defined by asymmetric power relations. It is the primary mechanism for neutralizing the comprehensive pressure exerted by Western nations, which seeks to constrain Iran's economic and diplomatic options. This partnership provides a multi-dimensional framework for development and engagement that operates parallel to, and independent of, Western-dominated systems.

Economically, China serves as Iran's principal partner for sustainable growth. It is the leading destination for Iranian hydrocarbon exports and a critical source of imported goods, technology, raw materials, and industrial equipment. This commercial relationship is sustained through bilateral mechanisms designed for neutralizing the impact of sanctions and operating outside the dollar-dominated financial system. Beyond

trade, Chinese investment is pivotal for modernizing Iran's national infrastructure, including its transportation networks, energy grid, and telecommunications systems.

The partnership's potential, however, extends far beyond energy and infrastructure into dynamic, knowledge-based sectors. Iran possesses a sophisticated and highly educated human resource base, with significant depth in engineering, medicine, and basic sciences. This creates substantial opportunities for joint ventures in third countries, where Chinese capital and project scale can be combined with Iranian technical expertise and regional cultural literacy to export engineering, construction, and technical services. Furthermore, collaboration can revitalize Iran's established industrial sectors, such as its domestic automobile industry, through joint manufacturing, technology transfer, and co-development of new markets in Eurasia and beyond.

Diplomatically, Chinese support within international institutions provides Iran with essential strategic cover. It legitimizes Iran's stance against unilateral coercive measures and ensures its voice is heard in multilateral forums, thereby preventing complete isolation.

Strategically, the relationship facilitates access to advanced technologies and integration into alternative financial and logistical networks. This access is crucial for modernizing Iran's industrial and scientific base. The synergy created is transformative. Iran provides China with unparalleled geostrategic access and energy security, while China provides Iran with the economic connectivity, technological pathways, and diplomatic solidarity necessary to ensure its sovereign agency. Together, they form a complementary dyad whose combined resilience and influence elevate both nations' positions on the global stage.

The Path Forward: Institutionalizing a Durable Partnership

For this strategic alignment to achieve its full potential, its profound logic must be translated into permanent bureaucratic and institutional reality. Moving from high-level political understanding to deep, operational integration is the essential next phase. This progression requires each nation to undertake concrete, reciprocal actions predicated on a clear-eyed assessment of the other's strategic character and needs.

For China, this necessitates a shift from declaratory support to the execution of specific, high-value commitments that affirm strategic reliability. This forward momentum, however, must be grounded in a clear-eyed recognition of Iran's comprehensive and authentic commitment to the partnership. The Iranian state possesses a deeply ingrained resilience, forged through decades of geopolitical resistance, including a protracted war, sustained covert operations, attempts at subversion, and unprecedented campaigns of

maximum economic pressure. This political steadfastness is mirrored by the dynamic adaptability of Iran's private sector, which has sustained a complex industrial and technological base despite profound external constraints. This dual-layered resilience—spanning a durable political establishment and an innovative, self-reliant economy—confirms Iran's viability as a stable and capable long-term partner. Crucially, Tehran's strategic calculus views its partnership with Beijing not as a transient tactic to balance relations with the West, but as a fundamental and enduring reorientation toward a multipolar world.

Acknowledging this strategic sincerity is the bedrock for building unwavering trust and for executing the necessary steps. A primary and urgent imperative is the full implementation of the landmark 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Agreement, transforming its framework from a symbolic document into the active blueprint for integration. This requires both parties to systematically identify and dismantle bureaucratic, financial, and logistical obstacles hindering its projects. Concrete steps from Beijing include elevating diplomatic coordination through a permanent, high-level strategic dialogue forum specifically tasked with overseeing the agreement's execution and synchronizing policies on Eurasian connectivity and regional security. Deepening economic integration necessitates accelerating the agreement's pivotal Belt and Road Initiative projects within Iran, particularly the North-South Transport Corridor, with dedicated financing and technical engagement, while actively facilitating Iran's incorporation into broader Eurasian financial and trade architectures. On the strategic and defense front, structured cooperation on areas of mutual concern—such as maritime security, cybersecurity, and defensive technology—would build mutual capacity within a shared framework of regional stability, as envisioned in the strategic pact.

To meet this commitment and demonstrate its own strategic seriousness, Iran must correspondingly act to formalize the partnership as a definitive national priority. This can be achieved through the establishment of a dedicated, high-level body vested with the exclusive mandate to institutionalize, manage, and crucially, drive the implementation of all facets of the strategic relationship with China, with the 25-Year Agreement as its core directive. Led by a senior figure with cross-factional authority and public credibility, this entity would function as the central coordinating mechanism to overcome internal fragmentation and external barriers. Its purpose would be to eliminate bureaucratic obstacles, maintain continuous strategic dialogue, and ensure the rigorous and timely execution of agreed projects, providing Beijing with a reliable and authoritative single point of contact dedicated to tangible outcomes.

Parallel to these core administrative structures, both nations must proactively construct the soft architecture of their alliance. This entails creating a joint framework for public diplomacy and scholarly exchange, designed to articulate shared perspectives and counter externally driven narratives that seek to undermine mutual trust. Furthermore, a robust educational and cultural initiative is imperative. Expanding university linkages, fostering academic and professional exchanges, and launching a concerted effort to enhance language study—promoting Persian literacy in China and Mandarin literacy in Iran—will forge the human connections necessary to sustain the partnership across generations.

The implementation of such comprehensive and permanent mechanisms will send an unambiguous signal of long-term strategic intent. This process of mutual institutionalization, integrating both tangible cooperation and societal engagement, provides the essential scaffolding required to transform a strategic alignment into an unbreakable nexus of shared capability and purpose.

Conclusion: Forging a New Paradigm

The Iran-China strategic partnership is a definitive feature of the twenty-first-century geopolitical architecture. It is an organic alliance, grounded in shared philosophical resistance to hegemony, cemented by identical security perceptions, and necessitated by profound strategic interdependence. This partnership functions as a critical balancing force, accelerating the transition from a unipolar system to a genuinely multipolar world order. By taking the decisive step to institutionalize this bond through dedicated mechanisms, both Beijing and Tehran can secure their sovereign trajectories, enhance their collective security, and solidify the foundations of a more diversified and stable international system. The moment for such consequential action is unequivocally at hand.

