China and Iran are the modern heirs to two ancient civilizations, a fact that shapes their interactions and colors their leaders’ sense of identity and place in the contemporary world. China established trade relations with ancient Persia via the Silk Road thousands of years ago. Although Iran, with its abundant energy resources and prominent role in international politics, has always been a country of interest to China, Sino-Iranian relations will become even more intense and strategic as the interests shared by the two nations develop within China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), as well as through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). One year after President Xi Jinping’s landmark visit to Tehran, ChinaMed’s Sajjad Talebi interviews Mohammad Hassan Khani, Associate Professor of International Relations at the Imam Sadiq University in Tehran.

The relationship between Iran and China has not been without moments of uncertainty or ambiguity, most notably in the 1970s – when the new regime born out the Revolution did not look kindly upon China and its relationship with the Shah – or in the 1980s, when China sold weapons to both Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, according to Khani, the relationship between Iran and China has developed in a consistent manner over the decades, thanks to significant overlapping interests in the energy, trade, and diplomatic realms. Politically, the two countries hold similar views when it comes to opposing the dominance of the United States in world affairs while promoting a multipolar international system.
For China, Iran is an important partner and source of leverage against the United States. A relationship with Iran provides China with the unique opportunity to have a strategic foothold in the Middle East and Central Asia, and assists Beijing in implementing the BRI strategy. Moreover, a strong Iran distracts the U.S. military, occupying its attention in the Persian Gulf and making it harder for it to pivot toward China. China's view of and approach toward Iran is rooted in part in its perception of the United States as a geopolitical and military rival.

Despite its economic interdependence with the United States, China does not trust U.S. intentions. Beijing is especially concerned about Washington's ability to dominate strategic global regions and cut off China's energy supplies during a potential military conflict. Thus, a strong economic, diplomatic, and military partnership with Iran assists China in balancing US power in the Middle East.

Referring to China's BRI, Khani argues that the Silk Road is a familiar concept for Iranians and, as such, is likely to remain stable, despite some occasional turbulences. Nevertheless, Iran's economy has seized every opportunity to show its strong opposition to the unilateral nature of U.S. foreign policies, and the United States have many common economic and diplomatic interests. With this in mind, Iranian leaders have tried to adjust their expectations of China and adopt a pragmatic approach. As far as the nuclear issue is concerned, Tehran has welcomed China's role. During the marathon negotiations between Iran and the other powers involved, Tehran appreciated China's constructive and independent participation. In particular, China's emphasis on the necessity that all parties, including the U.S., have to be fully committed to the successful implementation of a deal was critical for Iran.

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As Khani notes, Iran is well aware of the fact that the Sino-US relationship is extremely complex and geopolitical considerations fall short of explaining the broader picture. While Beijing has seized every opportunity to show its dissatisfaction, and in some cases, its strong opposition to the unilateral nature of U.S. foreign policies, China and the United States have many common economic and diplomatic interests. With this in mind, Iranian leaders have tried to adjust their expectations of China and adopt a pragmatic approach. As far as the nuclear issue is concerned, Tehran has welcomed China's role. During the marathon negotiations between Iran and the other powers involved, Tehran appreciated China's constructive and independent participation. In particular, China's emphasis on the necessity that all parties, including the U.S., have to be fully committed to the successful implementation of a deal was critical for Iran.

Referring to China's BRI, Khani argues that the Silk Road is a familiar concept for Iranians and remains a powerful symbol of a rich heritage: the image of the Persian and Chinese empires, two civilizations on opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass, inspires pride in both Iran and China. Such a positive image is a great diplomatic asset for Iran to the extent that it can offer a solid alternative to Western diplomatic and economic policies. For example, Iranian media emphasized that the country has much to learn from China's development strategy and closer economic cooperation can help the Iranian economy grow faster. China has been Iran's primary trading partner both in terms of exports and imports since 2007; moreover, the share of Chinese investments in Iran has grown from less than 1% in 2009 to 6.5% in 2015, even reaching 8% in 2014. At the same time, although China's strategy of diversification has led to a reduction of the Iranian share in the Chinese oil market (18% in 2001), Iran's oil still makes for more than 8% of Chinese crude oil imports.

For Teheran, room for diplomatic maneuvering is growing, as the country rejoins the international community and global markets. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for China. Companies of many other countries and Chinese companies have thus far had to endure in doing business with Iran. On the other hand, the opening of the Iranian market will attract the companies of many other countries and Chinese companies will face increasing competition. Tellingly, after the conclusion of the nuclear deal, President Rouhani's first trip abroad was to Italy and France. In the future, the Sino-Iranian relationship is likely to remain stable, despite some occasional turbulences, thanks to the expansion of a diverse set of common interests.

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