

CHINA'S IDEATIONAL INFLUENCE ON IRAN: THE 25-YEAR COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP THROUGH ROLE THEORY AND POLITICAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The conclusion of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Iran in 2021 represented a significant milestone in the evolution of their bilateral relations. Framed within the Belt and Road Initiative, this agreement became both a vehicle for cooperation and a shared institutional arrangement. Based on Wendt's Constructivism and on role theory, the analysis contends that China articulates a particular international identity and seeks to shape the ideational environment of its partners, fostering alignment with Chinese norms and policy orientations. To assess the extent to which such influence is reflected in Iran, the study examines the narratives of political leaders and key opinion makers through discourse analysis, focusing on their interpretations of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative; Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; China; Iran.

Resumo

A assinatura da Parceria Estratégica Abrangente entre a China e o Irão em 2021 representou um marco significativo na evolução das suas relações bilaterais. Enquadrado na Iniciativa da Rota da Seda, este acordo tornou-se simultaneamente um veículo de cooperação e um acordo institucional partilhado. Com base no construtivismo de Wendt e na teoria dos papéis, a análise defende que a China articula uma identidade internacional específica e procura moldar o ambiente ideacional dos seus parceiros, promovendo o alinhamento com as normas e orientações políticas chinesas. Para avaliar em que medida essa influência se reflete no Irão, o estudo examina as narrativas de líderes políticos e formadores de opinião importantes através da análise do discurso, centrando-se nas suas interpretações da Parceria Estratégica Abrangente.



Palavras-chave

Iniciativa «Belt and Road»; Parceria Estratégica Abrangente; China; Irão.

How to cite this article

Matos, André & Ribeiro, Eduardo (2026). China's Ideational Influence on Iran: The 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Through Role Theory and Political Narratives. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*, VOL. 17, Nº. 1, May 2026, pp. 477-501. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.17.1.24>.

Article submitted on 4 April 2025 and accepted on 5 January 2026.





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Introduction

Historically peripheral to China, the Middle East became strategically significant in the 21st century. Early Ming Dynasty interactions waned due to domestic priorities, and Beijing's modern engagement only began in 1949. China's role grew notably in the 1990s and 2000s as an emerging economic power (Kemp, 2012; Elnaggar, 2020).

Since the early years of the twenty-first century - and particularly throughout its second decade - China has advanced three main vectors of interest, stimulated by the opportunities created both by the Arab Spring and by the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The first would assure a secure energy supply, driven by China's sustained dependence on energy imports to support economic growth, particularly oil (Qian, 2016). The second vector concerns the expansion of trade, the safeguarding of strategic transport corridors, and the development of infrastructures capable of ensuring their security and functionality. Finally, a third, secondary vector concerns security cooperation with the region's States, with the primary goal of combating what Beijing calls the "Three Evils" - terrorism, extremism, and separatism (Castilla, 2016; Kamel, 2018; Hoh, 2019).

Alongside economic and security goals, Beijing developed political ties, establishing the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (2004) and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue. Guided by non-interference, China's "business-first" approach since 2011 fostered efficient ties with rival regional states, offering an alternative model amid the Arab Spring's turmoil and U.S. disengagement (Kemp, 2012; Sidlo, 2020; Hoh, 2019).



Over the last decade, China's growing presence in the Middle East has been most visibly expressed through trade, energy interdependence, infrastructure connectivity, and the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this context, Iran occupies a particularly relevant position due to its geostrategic location, energy resources, and the political constraints imposed by sanctions and regional rivalry. The 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), formally signed in 2021, marked a turning point in the institutionalisation of Sino-Iranian relations, consolidating a long-term framework for cooperation in economic, infrastructural, and political terms.

Most analyses of China-Iran relations have understandably emphasised material drivers: energy security, sanctions evasion, trade diversification, and geopolitical balancing. These factors are essential and cannot be dismissed. However, if the CSP is treated only as an economic arrangement, an important part of the relationship remains underexplored: the extent to which China also shapes the ideational environment in which Iranian elites interpret, justify, and publicly frame this partnership.

China's "Pivot to the West" strategy strengthened perceptions of its political influence in the Middle East. Through the BRI, Beijing pursued a soft-power approach, in clear contrast to U.S. tactics. In his speech at the Arab League on 21 January 2016, President Xi Jinping stressed peace, cooperation, and mutual benefit, calling on regional states to join the BRI (Sharma, 2019; Lin, 2017). On that occasion, Xi highlighted the distinctive traits of China's engagement in the Middle East, presenting the country as a promoter of peace talks rather than a seeker of power or "any sphere of influence" in the region. He described China instead as a builder of "a cooperative network for mutual benefits and win-win results" and a "circle of friends". However, Xi also called on Middle Eastern countries to join the BRI, presenting it as the main framework for regional cooperation. (China Daily, 2017)

Of China's \$770 billion BRI investment since 2013, 14% has gone to the Middle East, making it the fourth-largest regional recipient (Wang, 2021). Initially excluded, states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq gradually joined by signing Memoranda of Understanding, with Iran playing a pivotal role due to its strategic oil resources and location (Shariatnia and Azizi, 2017; Githaiga et al. 2019; Cordesman, 2007)¹. The strengthening of China-Iran ties within the framework of the Initiative comes largely from both states' perception of the objective benefits derived from their engagement. While these material considerations help explain the dynamics of the relationship and, consequently, China's expanding influence over the Tehran regime, they are not sufficient to capture the full scope and depth of that influence. "Influence" as a concept must be

¹ Within the framework of what has been termed the "Asian Energy Security Grid," Iran's geographical position renders it a pivotal actor in ensuring the connectivity of the global energy network China seeks to establish—particularly in West Asia—since it is the only country in the region "with the ability to meet part of China's oil and gas needs through both land and sea." Iran's involvement in a series of pipeline projects, including the Iran-Pakistan pipeline and the interconnection with Turkmenistan, would not only secure China's overland energy supply but also enable Iran to export energy to the Chinese market via land routes. This would provide an alternative to traditional and more volatile maritime corridors. For further details, see Selmier, Travis. "The Belt and Road Initiative and the influence of Islamic economies." *Economic and Political Studies* 6, no. 3 (2018): 255-277.



understood not only in terms of its material impact - particularly in the economic sphere - but also as the capacity to shape and guide perceptions about oneself, about the other, and about the functioning of the international system.

This article contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it examines the China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership not only through its material drivers, but also through its ideational dimension, while recognising that sanctions, trade, and geopolitical pressures remain central to the relationship. Second, it makes "ideational influence" analytically explicit by assessing whether Iranian political authorities and influential opinion makers reproduce and normalise discursive frames associated with China's projected international role. Third, it combines thematic categorisation and qualitative discourse analysis in a focused corpus, offering an empirically grounded approach to the study of ideational alignment in elite narratives.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This article starts from the assumption that influence in international politics is not exhausted by material dependence or transactional gains. In addition to economic leverage, states may exercise influence by shaping the categories, narratives, and role expectations through which other actors understand bilateral cooperation and the international order. In this sense, China's influence may be observed not only in the practical expansion of cooperation with Iran, but also in the discursive normalisation of specific principles and frames associated with Beijing's international role, such as sovereignty-centered order, non-interference, "win-win" cooperation, civilisational rhetoric, and opposition to Western unilateralism.

Existing literature on China-Iran relations and on China's broader engagement in the Middle East has predominantly emphasised material and strategic drivers, especially energy security, trade expansion, sanctions, and connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative (Kemp, 2012; Wuthnow, 2016; Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018; Hoh, 2019; Shariatnia and Azizi, 2017; 2019). This literature is indispensable for explaining why Sino-Iranian cooperation has deepened over time, particularly under conditions of U.S. pressure and Iran's search for economic alternatives. However, its main focus remains on interests, constraints, and strategic calculations, leaving comparatively less room for a systematic analysis of how influence is also produced through discourse, identity, and role-related meanings.

A second group of academic contributions provides a more suitable basis for that analytical move. Studies on China's international projection increasingly stress that Chinese influence cannot be reduced to material capability alone, and that it must be understood as socially mediated and context-dependent (Fung et al., 2022). In parallel, works on the ideational dimension of China's rise emphasise the role of narratives, symbols, and normative language in shaping perceptions of China and in structuring the political meaning of cooperation, such as Wilson, 2021 and Elmalı, 2022. These texts were especially relevant for the present article because they clarify how discourse may



function not merely as rhetoric, but as a mechanism through which international roles, expectations, and forms of legitimacy are negotiated.

This perspective has also been applied in regional studies. Garlick and Qin (2022) show, in the Central and Eastern European context, that Chinese influence is partly exercised through ideational and interpretive channels, and that these can be traced through comparative analysis of elite and scholarly narratives. Although the geopolitical context differs from the Iranian case, the analytical implication is highly relevant, as Chinese-led cooperation frameworks generate not only material expectations but also discursive contestation and alignment around political meaning.

In the specific case of Iran, the ideational dimension has received more limited and uneven treatment. Forough (2020) offers a particularly important contribution by highlighting the ideational nexus linking Iran and China within the BRI, including civilisational discourse and alternative geopolitical imaginaries. His later work on the 25-year deal (Forough, 2021) also reinforces the need to read the Partnership beyond its economic provisions. At the same time, broader analyses of Iran-China relations and regional alignments remind us that convergence should not be overstated: structural incentives remain central (Shariatinia, 2011), and overlapping anti-Western positions do not automatically produce a fully institutionalised strategic bloc (Grajewski, 2022). Bearing this in mind, the present article addresses a specific gap: the lack of a systematic analysis of how Chinese ideational influence is reflected in Iranian elite narratives on the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, by combining constructivism and role theory with a structured discourse analysis of statements by political authorities and opinion makers.

As said, this study uses Wendt's Social Constructivism and role theory to explore how the BRI deepens Iran-China ties through shared ideational factors, including identity-related. Civilisational rhetoric, mutual enmity toward the U.S., and shared foreign policy principles underpin this partnership, drawing on historical and civilisational narratives that both sides mobilise in contemporary political discourse. Moreover, this common perception is reflected in the narratives articulated by Iran's political leadership and prominent opinion makers concerning the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

For the purposes of this investigation, "ideational influence" refers to the capacity of one state's projected identity, normative language, and role conceptions to shape the interpretive frames through which political elites in another state publicly describe bilateral cooperation and the international order. This definition does not assume passive imitation or ideological dependence. Instead, it captures a process of selective appropriation, in which domestic actors adopt and rearticulate external narratives in ways that remain compatible with their own political priorities. This distinction is important in the Iran-China case. The existence of strong material incentives (sanctions pressure, trade opportunities, and geopolitical balancing) does not preclude ideational influence; rather, it may create favorable conditions for discursive convergence. The empirical task, therefore, is not to deny material causality, but to assess whether elite narratives about the CSP also reveal a patterned alignment with Chinese strategic and normative frames.



Additionally, role theory helps define China's self-perceived role in the BRI and its influence on Middle Eastern relationships, particularly with Iran. It highlights Beijing's ambitions to expand globally and assert its position in the international system (Harnisch, 2012; Michalski and Pan, 2017). Wendt's constructivism explains how roles in the international system emerge from socially constructed interactions. States' positions are shaped by their perceptions of themselves and others, formed through processes of socialisation in "collective structures" (Wendt, 1992; Knoblauch, 2013). Although the China-Iran bilateral relationship has developed as a collective structure in which both states have gradually constructed convergent identities, for the purposes of this study the BRI and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, most notably the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2021, will be considered the relevant "collective structures." In recent years, these instruments have formed the central basis of bilateral interaction, serving as the channels through which China has projected its own identity and exerted influence on Iran by shaping the latter's self-perception.

The central analytical question is therefore the following: to what extent is China's ideational influence visible in the narratives produced by Iranian political authorities and influential opinion makers regarding the 25-year CSP? By focusing on elite narratives, this article does not seek to measure public opinion in Iran. Rather, it examines how politically relevant actors frame the Partnership and whether their discourse reflects convergent role conceptions and normative assumptions compatible with China's strategic narratives.

The Iranian case is particularly important for assessing ideational influence because Iran's foreign policy combines a strong ideological tradition with a long record of strategic adaptation. Since the 1979 Revolution, the principle often summarised as "Neither East nor West" has occupied a central place in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy doctrine. At the same time, changing international pressures, such as sanctions, regional insecurity, and tensions with the United States, have encouraged a more pragmatic reconfiguration of external partnerships, including a stronger turn to the East.

This tension between doctrinal autonomy and strategic realignment makes Iran a critical case. If Chinese ideational influence is visible in Iranian elite narratives, it is likely to emerge not as simple rhetorical imitation, but as a selective process of appropriation, reinterpretation, and alignment shaped by Iran's own political priorities. For this reason, attention to elite discourse is essential: political leaders, state-affiliated media, and influential commentators play a central role in constructing the public meaning of the CSP and in signaling the terms through which the relationship with China is legitimised domestically and internationally.

This article adopts a theory-led mixed-method design that combines structured qualitative content analysis with interpretive discourse analysis. The methodological choice follows directly from the article's theoretical framework: if ideational influence is understood as the capacity to shape meanings, roles, and expectations, then the empirical strategy must capture both the frequency of recurring argumentative patterns



and the way these patterns are articulated linguistically in elite discourse (Wendt, 1992; Onuf, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012).

The empirical corpus is composed of ten public texts (speeches, interviews, official statements, and opinion pieces) produced by Iranian political authorities and politically relevant opinion makers between April 2020 and April 2021. This period was selected because it corresponds to the final negotiation and formalisation phase of the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and therefore captures the moment in which elite narratives sought to frame the meaning, legitimacy, and expected effects of the agreement. The sample is purposive rather than representative: documents were included when they (1) explicitly referred to the CSP and/or Sino-Iranian strategic cooperation under the BRI framework, and (2) were attributable to actors with agenda-setting relevance in Iran's political or para-political sphere. This also means that the article analyses a bounded discursive moment, primarily the late Rouhani period, rather than all phases of Iranian foreign policy.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, all ten texts were coded through a deductive coding frame derived from the literature and the theoretical argument of the article. Two dimensions were coded: tone (positive, skeptical, negative) and argumentative frames (economic; cultural/identity; democracy or human rights; security-related; international system/global order; nuclear deal; military cooperation; anti-American). The unit of analysis was the document, but coding decisions were based on explicit textual markers (keywords, expressions, and argumentative passages). A frame was coded as present when it appeared at least once in a substantively meaningful way. To improve procedural consistency, the coding frame and category definitions were fixed before the full coding round, and the corpus was re-read after the initial coding to verify category stability and resolve borderline cases (Bowen, 2009).

In the second stage, the coded material was subjected to discourse analysis in order to interpret how elite actors constructed the CSP as a meaningful political object. This qualitative step focused not only on recurrent themes but also on rhetorical strategies, legitimising narratives, silences, and implicit contrasts. This stage is essential because ideational influence is not exhausted by thematic frequency: it also depends on how language normalises certain role expectations, identities, and geopolitical hierarchies (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak and Meyer, 2015). Methodologically, the article does not claim to measure public opinion in Iran; rather, it examines elite discourse as a politically consequential layer of meaning production, while acknowledging that future research should compare elite narratives across different Iranian political periods and with non-elite or foreign sources.

The BRI as a reflection of Chinese identity

Wendt describes identity as stable role-specific understandings shaped by shared meanings (Wendt, 1992). Chinese identity reflects both Sinocentric superiority, rooted in its historical view as the world's center, and insecurity stemming from the "century of humiliation" (Weissmann, 2015; Gaddis, 2017). Tensions within Chinese identity



complicate defining its role in the international system (Holsti, 1970). By the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping shaped China as a “responsible power,” and the 2000 “Going Global” strategy promoted foreign investment and market interconnection, boosting China’s status as an “emerging power” (Goldstein, 1998; Ikenberry, 2008).

In recent decades, Chinese foreign policy shifted toward a revisionist stance, challenging the liberal order. The 2008 financial crisis exposed global systemic weaknesses and inspired Beijing to pursue an alternative economic and political order to counter U.S. dominance (Deng, 2014; Etzioni, 2011; Zhang, 2009). Hu Jintao introduced the vision of a harmonious global order, which Xi Jinping later expanded after assuming leadership (especially from 2012–2013 onward), aspiring to lead an alternative system based on sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and inclusivity. This order contrasts with Western models, promoting fairness and shared prosperity (Ding, 2008; Breslin, 2009; Michalski and Pan, 2017). This reconceptualisation of China’s role in international affairs - and, by extension, of its identity - would be accompanied by new expectations associated with that evolving role. In that sense, Chinese Foreign Policy would reflect those expectations and materialise this role and identity (Thies, 2010; Harnisch, 2012; Michalski and Pan, 2017; Shala, 2021).

Launched in 2013, the BRI exemplifies China’s global ambitions. As the centerpiece of Beijing’s “Going Global” strategy, it became a legal priority in 2017, aiming to create a trade and investment network that fosters prosperity while cementing China’s leadership (Taylor and Zajontz, 2020). In his 2013 speech in Kazakhstan introducing the Initiative, Xi Jinping emphasised its significance, presenting it as inspired by the Ancient Silk Road and aimed at opening a “new chapter of friendship” founded on “solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusivity, mutual learning, and win-win cooperation”. The Initiative, he argued, would foster the joint pursuit of development and peace among its members. At its core, China was to assume a pivotal leadership role - one not only grounded in the contemporary resonance of a celebrated past, but also regarded as necessary and accepted by the participating states as integral to the Initiative. The justification for this acceptance comes from the fact that this leadership was promoted and seen as a form of connective leadership presented as fair and mutually beneficial (Wang, 2016; Andornino, 2017).

In this sense, the way that this role is conceived and understood is both a result of its promotion by China and of the understanding and expectations created around it by the States participating in the Initiative, being, in that sense, a role born of the sharing and intersubjective meanings of actors in interaction (Wendt, 1992; Harnisch, 2012).

China and Iran’s interaction on the BRI: historical ideational factors and revived material needs

Iran’s foreign policy cannot be reduced to a purely economic logic, nor can it be read as a fixed ideological posture. Since 1979, it has been shaped by a persistent tension between revolutionary principles and pragmatic state interests, a duality that has long



been identified in the literature on the Islamic Republic's external behaviour (Ramazani, 2004; Rakel, 2007; Khelghat-Doost, 2022). This tension is also embedded in the constitutional and normative foundations of the regime: the post-revolutionary state formally articulated a foreign policy anchored in independence, anti-domination, and the rejection of subordination to great powers, often summarised in the principle of "Neither East nor West" (Papan-Matin, 2014). In practice, however, this principle has not implied strategic equidistance, but rather a recurring effort to preserve regime autonomy while selectively engaging external powers according to shifting pressures and opportunities (Barzegar and Divsallar, 2017; Ramazani, 2004).

A second point that is essential for this article is that Iranian foreign policy is not produced by a single actor, but through a layered and contested elite structure. The Supreme Leader, the presidency, the foreign ministry, security institutions, and semi-official intellectual networks all shape policy narratives, though not with equal weight across periods (Bazoobandi, Heibach and Richter, 2024). This helps explain why Iran's external discourse has combined continuity with adaptation across different presidencies: pragmatic openings and diplomatic diversification under Rafsanjani and Khatami, a stronger anti-Western rhetorical line under Ahmadinejad, selective re-engagement with Europe during Rouhani's presidency, and a more explicit consolidation of the "Look East" orientation under Raisi (Azizi, 2023; Khelghat-Doost, 2022). Rather than a sudden rupture, the contemporary strategic turn to Asia should therefore be read as the intensification of an existing tendency, made more durable by sanctions, regional competition, and declining expectations regarding the West (Azizi, 2023).

Within this broader trajectory, China occupies a distinctive place in Iranian strategic thinking. The literature shows that Tehran has viewed China simultaneously as an economic partner, a diplomatic hedge, and a symbolically useful pole in a less Western-centered order, especially since the mid-2000s (Shariatinia, 2011; Fan, 2022). Yet this relationship has also been marked by asymmetry and constraint. Even when Iranian elites promoted a "Look to the East" policy, Beijing's approach remained cautious and interest-driven, particularly under the pressure of U.S. sanctions and China's wider global priorities (Shariatinia, 2011; Chaziza, 2020). This is precisely why an ideational approach is useful here: material cooperation alone does not explain why Iranian official and semi-official narratives repeatedly frame China not just as a partner of necessity, but as a legitimate and even civilisationally resonant strategic interlocutor (Fan, 2022).

This context is particularly relevant for interpreting the discourse surrounding the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Existing scholarship on Iran and the BRI highlights a dual pattern of expectation and caution ("hope and fear"), in which Iranian actors recognise both the opportunities of Chinese connectivity and the risks of dependency or unequal gains (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2019; Chaziza, 2020). At the same time, more ideationally oriented analyses show that Iranian elite discourse often presents Iran as a civilisational crossroads in an emerging Afro-Eurasian space, a framing that converges with key symbolic elements of China's BRI narrative (Forough, 2020; Fan, 2022). By situating the Iranian case within this doctrinal and elite-political background, the article can better demonstrate that the narratives examined in the empirical section



are not isolated statements, but part of a longer process in which strategic necessity, elite mediation, and ideational alignment intersect (Saleh and Yazdanshenas, 2023; Bazoobandi, Heibach and Richter, 2024).

The BRI reflects China's "interconnected leadership" by advancing shared principles and tangible benefits (Selmier, 2018; Andornino, 2017). Iran and China, whose ties date back to the Ancient Silk Road, find their modern partnership driven by material needs and historical-cultural commonalities (Shariatinia and Azizi, 2017; 2019).

Both countries' revival of formal relationships, since 1971, and especially since 1979, when the Iranian Revolution took place and when Deng Xiaoping's Open-Door Policy was presented and began to be implemented, had in its core the need to correspond to each country's material needs (Scott, 2016). Since the 1980s, China has become a major purchaser of Iranian energy supplies. Iran became one of China's major purchasers of defense-related goods, military equipment, and nuclear-related technology, particularly since the 1980s due to the Iran-Iraq War, where China became a supplier of conventional weapons (Davis et al. 2012). During the 1990s, energy emerged as the central axis of China-Iran relations, with Beijing increasingly viewing Tehran as a key partner for ensuring its energy security. This partnership continued to evolve in subsequent decades to address those needs. However, its expansion and consolidation also came from shared identity elements and convergent perceptions of common threats.

The collective memory of both nations' humiliation at the hands of imperial and foreign powers, their historical opposition to colonialism, and their mutual concern over losing autonomy and sovereignty rooted in common past experiences, together with a determination to preserve internal cohesion and resist external hegemonism, whether regional or global, "color each country's historical narrative" in strikingly similar ways (Ibid). In the same way, after "centuries of humiliation," both states have shaped their foreign policy, at least rhetorically, by presenting themselves as champions of the non-aligned movement and as committed partners of other developing nations, seeking to reclaim the international influence they believe was taken from them by Western powers since the sixteenth century. The long-standing networks forged through centuries of interaction, communication, trade, and cultural as well as economic exchange are reinforced by a "rhetoric of civilisational solidarity" that "seemed to lubricate the process of Sino-Iranian cooperation" (Garver, 2006).

Given the identity affinities between the two countries, it suggests that they tend to perceive threats in markedly similar ways. These convergent perceptions have, in turn, contributed to bringing Tehran and Beijing closer together over the past few decades. First and foremost, the United States is perceived as a hegemonic and historical threat to both countries (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018; Fulton, 2019). In the 2013 and 2015 Defense White Papers, China states the danger of hegemonism to the country's rise and overall regional stability (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2013; The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 2015). Similarly, since the 1979 Revolution, the Iranian regime has depicted the United States as its principal adversary,



the “Great Satan”, consistently framing its intentions and actions in the Middle Eastern context in a negative and adversarial light.

Secondly, this perception of a shared enemy has been essential for reinforcing both countries’ relationship materially and cultivating a benevolent perception of each other. In the Iran-Iraq War, Iran’s Defense needs were answered by China, being Beijing the country’s leading arms supplier in this conflict, accounting for 40 to 70 percent of all arms supplied (Conduit and Akbarzadeh, 2018). During the conflict, Iran employed Chinese missiles, including the Silkworm, and in 1987 used one to strike a U.S.-reflagged tanker. As tensions escalated and the international community condemned China for contributing to arms proliferation by supporting Iran, Beijing encouraged Tehran to accept a ceasefire in July 1988, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 598. China’s alignment with Iran during this war contributed to the perception among Iranian officials of Beijing as a dependable partner in safeguarding their interests and, consequently, “a key interlocutor” for Iran in the international arena.

Likewise, Iran’s imperative to export energy and China’s need to secure energy imports formed part of a broader regional environment in which China expanded strategic coordination frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the early 2000s: high-level platforms designed to counterbalance U.S. influence in the Middle East while addressing both regional and Chinese strategic needs in more concrete terms.

China and Iran’s perception of America’s enmity was “reinforced,” especially after the crisis surrounding Iran’s Nuclear Program and its consequences, namely the international sanctions imposed, the constant pressure applied by Washington to limit Beijing and Tehran’s interaction and the subsequent agreement on the nuclear program, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Shariatania and Azizi, 2017). Iran’s isolation did not diminish its strategic significance in Beijing’s eyes; rather, it created a window of opportunity for China. Although generally reluctant to support the imposition of sanctions on Iran - and even as pressures accumulated for stricter measures - Beijing “balanced its relations with Iran at points respecting the U.S. led sanctions on Iran while also making the most of the opportunities arising out of Iran’s isolation” (Roy-Chaudhury, 2021). The 2015 nuclear agreement subsequently opened the way for greater Chinese engagement in the Iranian economy and facilitated access to its energy market, despite the decline, since 2013, in China’s dependence on and prioritisation of Iranian energy supplies.

This reduction came from the sanctions regime implemented by the Obama Administration, which forced Beijing to choose between maintaining access to U.S. financial markets by cooperating with the sanctions and “solely relying on the global energy market,” or defying the regime and facing U.S. hostility (Wuthnow, 2016; Harold, 2015). Even so, the resulting status quo offered Beijing renewed opportunities to strengthen its ties with Tehran. Moreover, shifts in Iran’s foreign policy behavior, combined with the broader framework of the BRI, created favorable conditions for Chinese influence to expand further.



The BRI as the framework for a new relationship

In 2016, President Xi Jinping visited Iran and he was the first Chinese head of State to do so for almost 15 years. Together with the establishment of a broader comprehensive strategic partnership framework in 2016, the visit marked a significant step in consolidating Beijing's intentions and long-term objectives with Iran, later deepened through the 25-year CSP in 2021. The visit was interpreted as indicating a "new chapter of high-level exchanges between the two states." During his meeting with President Rouhani, Xi underlined that there were no "fundamental conflicts" between China and Iran, two countries with "no wars or disputes" and a history of "time-honored friendly exchanges and sincere cooperation" that had "stood the vicissitudes of the international landscape" (China Daily, 2016). These acknowledged and valued identity affinities between the two countries set the stage for the positive outcomes of the visit.

Seventeen agreements were concluded during the visit, covering a broad spectrum of areas. These included the strengthening of political relations through the establishment of an annual meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers aimed at deepening "mutual strategic trust"; the promotion of cultural exchanges, notably through tourism; and a joint commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes and opposition to the use of force in international relations. Nonetheless, the majority of the agreements focused on enhancing economic cooperation. Those included a 600-billion-dollar trade deal to be fulfilled until 2026 and the recognition of Iran's participation in the BRI that would allow the development of several areas within that framework, namely infrastructure construction, finance, and energy cooperation (Butch, 2021).

An Iran seeking to create favorable international conditions for economic growth and seeking to have a more cautious and cooperative regional approach after an unprecedented Nuclear Deal promoted by President Rouhani's pragmatic and more rationalist approach to Foreign Policy, one that sought to improve the country's international reputation and dilute, in some sense, its pariah and isolated status, the BRI was presented as a golden opportunity for those goals to be fulfilled (Golmohammadi, 2019; Shariatinia and Azizi, 2017). That is illustrated by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's statements in a meeting with President Xi Jinping in 2016 when he called the Initiative "very appropriate and wise," welcoming it as a new outline in the relationship of "two ancient civilisations" and as an opportunity for Iran to reach its goals (Sinaiee, 2021). In the same vein, Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Ali Tayyebnia said in the Belt and Road Initiative Forum in 2017 that Iran's position in the Initiative was "spectacular and ideal," showing enthusiasm for the Iran's participation in the Initiative (Financial Tribune, 2017). Moreover, the aspiration to strengthen ties with a like-minded partner, combined with the prospect of economic gains, thus encompassing both identity-based and material considerations, can be identified as key drivers behind the deepening of bilateral cooperation under the BRI and the broader strategic partnership. In this context, China's foreign policy and rhetoric have played an "increasing role in shaping Iran's international behavior".



This trajectory of closer ties was reinforced by President Trump's announcement on 8 May 2018 of the United States' withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal. Consequently, on 5 November of that year, all U.S. sanctions on Iran that had been suspended under the Agreement were reinstated as part of the "maximum pressure policy". The impact on Iran's economy was severe, with oil production, the cornerstone of its economic system, declining sharply.

Despite the U.S. Administration's reimposition of sanctions, the Chinese Government remained firmly committed to the nuclear deal, consistently defending what it terms Iran's right to the peaceful use of atomic energy². Furthermore, in an effort to mitigate the effects of the sanctions on Iran and on the BRI, Beijing worked closely with the Tehran regime to implement multiple Memoranda of Understanding signed in 2014. Through this continued engagement, China positioned itself as a dependable partner for Iran, capable of facilitating efforts to renegotiate the Nuclear Deal with the United States³. This perception of reliability was further consolidated with the signing of the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

The 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Although reportedly negotiated during President Xi Jinping's 2016 visit to Tehran, in July 2020 several documents were leaked concerning the expansion and upgrade of the already established Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Subsequently, on 27 March 2021, this enlarged and deepened partnership entered public debate after the circulation/leak of draft documents by Saeed Khatibzadeh, spokesperson for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The leak did not disclose specific details (such as the "financial and monetary resources" or the existence of binding contracts), but suggested a loosely defined framework of Chinese investment in Iran, amounting allegedly to 400 billion dollars over 25 years, in exchange for the supply of Iranian oil to China for the same period. Symbolically, the deal was signed on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states. Iran refers to it as a "strategic cooperation deal," yet both sides have publicly clarified that it does not constitute an alliance, a pact, or a legally binding agreement. Reza Zabib, a member of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, described the arrangement on Twitter as a "non-binding document". In a press conference on 29 March, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that the agreement "(...) neither includes any quantitative, specific contracts and goals nor

² Indeed, Beijing and Tehran continued to advance a number of nuclear-energy-related initiatives, many of which had been discussed during President Xi Jinping's 2016 visit. These included contracts for the construction of two 1,000-megawatt nuclear power plants, the development of an Arak heavy water reactor, and joint scientific research in the nuclear field (Butch, 2021).

³ In addition, Beijing has contributed to the financing of several research and development parks and innovation hubs in Iran. For further details, see: Sheikhi, Marjohn. "Science VP in China for promotion of tech. coop." MEHR News Agency, October 24, 2016. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/120769/Science-VP-in-China-for-promotion-of-tech-coop>; Sheikhi, Marjohn. "Iran's MERC signs scientific MoU with China." MEHR News Agency, December 10, 2016. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/121904/Iran-s-MERC-signs-scientific-MoU-with-China>.



targets any third party, and will provide a general framework for China-Iran cooperation going forward” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).

According to the leaked document, Beijing was expected to allocate 280 billion dollars to the development of Iran’s petrochemical, gas, and oil industries, and a further 120 billion dollars to the modernisation and upgrading of the country’s manufacturing and communications infrastructure connected to the BRI. Encompassing both public and private actors from each side, the deal purportedly envisaged close to 100 projects across a broad range of sectors beyond those already mentioned, including vaccine provision, pharmaceuticals, banking, consumer goods, and trade, with Chinese companies with Chinese companies expected to play a central role in implementing these projects. Tehran would primarily offset the costs of these large-scale investments through guaranteed oil exports to China at discounted prices (Dudgeon, 2021; DW, 2021).

With regard to nuclear issues, the document states that it “contributes towards guaranteeing the peacefulness of Iran’s nuclear activities” and affirms Iran’s legitimate right to the “peaceful use of nuclear energy according to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)”. It also specifies that the JCPOA should be implemented in “good faith and in an inclusive and balanced manner,” reinforcing both countries’ commitment to the agreement. Consequently, if the United States were to rejoin the JCPOA, it would have to accept the Agreement’s “existing scopes and parameters.” This framing underscores a perceived decline in U.S. influence in the region and a loss of leverage in any potential future nuclear deal negotiations (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2021).

Although Iran’s official news agency refers only to the “economic and cultural” dimensions of the cooperation, the leaked plan allegedly includes provisions for military collaboration. One reported element is the possible deployment of Chinese military personnel to Iran for training purposes and to enhance the interoperability of the two armed forces. This aspect, along with the JCPOA-related provisions, could serve as a deterrent to potential hostile military actions or threats against Iran in the region (Vatanka, 2021).

Despite the nature of the Partnership and what both countries publicly admit of it, this reflects the gradual intensification of Tehran and Beijing’s relationship not only materially but also in ideational terms, being a result of their constant interaction on specific “collective structures,” while demonstrating at the same time both countries’ detachment and friction with the United States, and thus a “common” definition and perception of the structure of the International System and the roles played by certain States in it—functioning of the International System (Harnisch, 2012).

Data Analysis and Results

The strengthening of Sino-Iranian ties through the CSP illustrates China’s influence on the narratives articulated by the Iranian elite. Although public opinion data remain scarce, an analysis of elite discourse sheds light on how their framing shapes collective



perceptions of the partnership. For this purpose, ten speeches and written statements⁴ from political leaders and opinion makers, delivered between April 2020 and April 2021, were examined. These were coded under two analytical dimensions: tone (positive, skeptical, or negative) and arguments used at least once (economic; related to the international system; security-related; concerning democracy or human rights; cultural or identity-based; anti-American; related to the nuclear deal; or enhancing military cooperation).

Beyond the uniformly positive tone identified across all ten documents, the corpus reveals a more structured pattern of discursive alignment. The convergence is not limited to official statements by the presidency or the foreign ministry (Docs. 1–4), but also extends to diplomats, university professors, media figures, and para-official opinion makers (Docs. 5–10). This distribution is analytically relevant because it suggests that support for the CSP is not expressed only as a formal state position, but as a broader elite narrative reproduced across different sites of meaning production. In this sense, the positive tone should be read less as a merely descriptive feature and more as an indicator of discursive stabilisation around the legitimacy of the Partnership (Table 1).

A first interpretive pattern is the close articulation between anti-American rhetoric and references to international order. In most documents, criticism of U.S. “unilateralism” and “interventionism” is not presented only as a bilateral grievance, but as evidence of a wider disorder affecting “security, peace, and stability” in the region (Docs. 1 and 10). Likewise, documents that emphasise the CSP as a response to sanctions (Docs. 2 and 3) do more than describe economic pressure: they frame the Partnership as part of a broader political strategy to resist external domination. This helps explain why anti-American references frequently overlap with “global order” arguments. The CSP is thus narrated not simply as a contract, but as a politically meaningful alignment within an alternative reading of international order.

A second pattern concerns the economic dimension, which remains central but performs an ideational function as well. As the coding table shows, economic arguments appear in almost all documents (with the exception of Doc. 8), and they consistently emphasise mutual gains, connectivity, and long-term development expectations. However, these references are not purely technical. In several cases, economic cooperation is linked to China’s perceived status and role, including the expectation that China is a reliable and exceptionally capable partner within the BRI framework, even described as “the most powerful state economically and militarily” (Doc. 9). This suggests that material cooperation is discursively embedded in a hierarchy of international roles in which China is represented not only as useful, but as a legitimate anchor of Iran’s strategic future.

A third pattern is the selective use of cultural and identity-based arguments. These are less frequent than economic and anti-American frames, but they play a disproportionate legitimising role. Expressions such as “common cultural grounds,” “long-term historical relations,” “Asian identity,” and “two founders of great civilisations” (Docs. 2, 7, and 9) do not merely praise bilateral ties; they help naturalise the Partnership by presenting it

⁴ The speeches’ sources (Docs.) are identified in the Bibliographic References.



as historically grounded and civilisationally coherent. This is particularly important for the article's argument on ideational influence, because it shows that the CSP is framed not only as expedient, but as symbolically appropriate. In other words, identity references work to transform strategic cooperation into a narrative of belonging and continuity.

Finally, the silences and asymmetries in the corpus are as revealing as the recurrent themes. Nuclear issues are mentioned only in a limited number of documents (Docs. 4, 8, and 10), despite their clear relevance to the broader strategic context, and military cooperation appears only once—and there in the form of denial (Doc. 7). The complete absence of democracy or human rights language across all ten documents is especially significant. Rather than a neutral omission, this silence suggests a discursive boundary: the CSP is consistently articulated through sovereignty, order, development, and anti-intervention, while normative vocabularies associated with liberal internationalism are excluded. Taken together, these patterns indicate that ideational convergence in the corpus is expressed not only through what is repeatedly said, but also through what is systematically left unsaid.

Overall, the empirical findings point to more than rhetorical support for a bilateral agreement. They reveal a structured discursive alignment in which economic cooperation, anti-American positioning, global-order narratives, and civilisational framing reinforce each other. This combination is what allows the CSP to function, in Iranian elite discourse, as both a material strategy and an ideationally meaningful partnership.

Conclusion

Regarding the research question posed in the introduction—whether Chinese ideational influence can be identified in the narratives of Iranian political authorities and opinion makers concerning the CSP—the findings suggest a consistent pattern of discursive convergence. Within the selected corpus, Chinese influence is visible not only in the positive valuation of the Partnership, but also in the recurrence of specific interpretive frames that align with Beijing's strategic narratives, particularly those related to sovereignty, anti-unilateralism, international order, and "win-win" cooperation.

At the same time, the findings should be interpreted with analytical caution. The corpus is limited to ten texts produced within a specific political moment (2020–2021), and it primarily reflects elite and para-official voices rather than broader public attitudes. For that reason, the article does not claim to demonstrate a generalised societal alignment, nor does it seek to isolate ideational factors from the material and geopolitical incentives that also structure Sino-Iranian cooperation. Instead, the evidence indicates that the CSP functions as a discursive and institutional setting in which material cooperation and ideational alignment reinforce one another.

The article's theoretical framework contributes to this interpretation by combining constructivism and role theory to analyse how shared meanings, role conceptions, and political expectations are articulated in elite discourse. Methodologically, the combined use of structured thematic categorisation and qualitative discourse analysis proved useful



for identifying both recurring argumentative patterns and strategic silences, including the selective marginalisation of nuclear and military themes and the complete absence of democracy or human-rights language. These omissions are analytically significant because they help define the normative boundaries within which the Partnership is publicly legitimised.

This study also contributes to the literature by examining the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership not only as a materially driven arrangement, but as an ideationally meaningful platform. While economic and geopolitical factors remain central, the findings indicate that the Partnership also supports the circulation of convergent narratives about order, cooperation, and the role of non-Western powers. Future research may build on this framework by expanding the corpus across different Iranian political periods, comparing elite and non-elite narratives, and assessing whether similar patterns of discursive alignment can be identified in other regional contexts shaped by China's strategic partnerships.

Looking ahead, comparative studies involving foreign journalists, academics, and political actors could help determine whether the observed discursive patterns are uniquely Iranian or part of a broader international echo of China's strategic narratives. Such an approach could further refine our understanding of how ideational influence travels and adapts across different political and cultural contexts.

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Documents

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Table 1. Visual distribution of tones and arguments⁵

Doc	Author/Origin	Tone			Arguments							
		Pos	Skep	Neg	Eco	Global Orde/ I.S	Sec.	Demo/ H.R	Cultural/ Identity	Anti-Americanism	Nuclear deal	Military coop.
1	President Rouhani	X			X		X			X		
2	President Rouhani	X				X	X		X	X		
3	President Rouhani	X			X	X	X			X	X	
4	Spokesperson of Ministry of Foreign Affairs	X			X	X	X			X		
5	Diplomat	X			X	X						
6	Opinion maker (University Professor)	X				X			X	X		
7	Opinion maker (University Professor)	X			X	X			X	X		X
8	Opinion makers (speakers in the international webinar)	X				X	X			X	X	
9	Opinion maker (Managing Director of the Islamic Republic News Agency)	X			X	X			X	X		
10	Opinion maker (journalist)	X			X	X			X	X	X	

⁵ The content analysis and the corresponding results table stem from research conducted for the preparation of a Master's thesis in International Relations. This material is original and has not been published or disseminated elsewhere.