

# Research on Iranian Elites' Perception of the “Belt and Road” Initiative

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**Abstract:** *Iran is a major country in the Middle East with the strongest overall national strength and an important fulcrum for China to implement the "Belt and Road" initiative. Studying Iran's perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative can clarify its strategic framework for China, look for more possibilities for cooperation, and strive for a benign interaction between China and Iran in the "Belt and Road" initiative. The elites have played a key role in forming Iran's perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative. This article uses the elite as the subject of cognition to study Iran's cognition of the "Belt and Road" and analyze the influencing factors that form the cognition.*

**Keywords:** *Perception, "One Belt One Road" Initiative, elite, Iran*

## 1. Introduction

Since the dramatic changes in the Middle East in 2010, the situation in West Asia and North Africa has undergone major changes. Due to the decline of the Arab world, the influence of non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey, Israel and other countries in the Middle East is increasing. Since the split of the Gulf Cooperation Council in June 2017, Iran has strengthened its influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and other countries. Iran plays a leading role in the process of regional change, and therefore is China's ideal political partner in the region.

## 2. Iran's elites' perception of the “Belt and Road” initiative

The Iranian elite has formed two different and contradictory views on developing relations with China under the framework of initiatives such as the "Belt and Road" initiative. These two attitudes can be called positive support and doubt. Traditionally, reformers in Iran's political sphere tend to expand ties with the West, and are skeptical of the great eastern powers (especially Russia and China). However, conservatives with a deep anti-Western background believe that Russia and China are potential allies of Iran and can resist the continuous pressure of the United States and promote its anti-hegemonic foreign policy.

Professors Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi from Shahid Behshti University in Iran believe that Iran is one of the participating countries of the “Belt and Road” initiative. The realization of the "Belt and Road" initiative will have two effects on Iran's geo-economic and political status. On the one hand, the project can enhance China's presence and influence in Iran and its surrounding political and economic activities, and create competition between Iran and China. On the other hand, Iran's participation in the “Belt and Road” initiative will help restore Iran's historical position on the ancient Silk Road. Therefore, in order to participate in the "One Belt One Road" initiative, Iran fell into hope and fear. On the one hand, the "Belt and Road" initiative has a negative impact on Iran's interests, so it makes Iran frightened. On the other hand, Iran's participation in this initiative can promote its economic development and enhance its historical role as a bridge between East and West. Therefore, Iran is full of hope. While trying to develop cooperation with China under the "Belt and Road" initiative, Iran is also developing relations with the European Union. Iran is trying to get the most benefit from this initiative and reduce the negative impact on its geo-economic and geopolitical interests. Maintaining this fragile balance may pose major challenges for Iran's active participation in the initiative.

In addition, they believe that Iran is a bridge connecting the East and the West on the ancient Silk Road and has great potential to play an important role in the New Silk Road. They analyzed the factors

affecting Iran-China cooperation in the context of the “Belt and Road” from the strategic and practical levels. At the strategic level, Iran defines the project as an opportunity to improve its position in the world economy, expand its influence on the international stage, and develop relations with China, a rising power. At the practical level, the opportunities and challenges facing Iran-China cooperation can be summarized in the five aspects of the “Belt and Road” initiative: policy communication, facility connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial connectivity, and people-to-people connectivity. The study believes that the main opportunity for cooperation between the two countries lies in the promotion of interconnection and the key challenge lies in financial integration.

Iranian Ambassador to Russia Mehdi Sanaei and Associate Professor Jahangir Karami of Tehran University believe that Iran is one of the main countries on the ancient Silk Road and that Iran plays an important role in the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). China is Iran's largest trading partner and the main market for Iran's exports. The bilateral cooperation under the "Belt and Road" framework will achieve brilliant achievements. Senior Iranian officials have repeatedly announced that they will try their best to cooperate with China under the "Belt and Road" initiative. From Iran's perspective, joining the initiative will play an important role in Iran's domestic economic development and the improvement of its international status. In addition, China pays great attention to Iran, and Iran's geostrategic position makes China pay close attention to Iran.

The former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations stated that the 25-year cooperation agreement between Iran and China marked a turning point in the development of bilateral relations and pointed out that such cooperation is of strategic importance. The “Belt and Road” initiative can bring Iran and China closer. Due to Iran's strategic position and energy reserves, it can carry out very extensive cooperation with China under the "25-year cooperation plan" and further expand its ties with the international community.

Professor Bahram Amirahmadian of Tehran University believes that today's world is becoming increasingly competitive, and Iran's share of world trade is less than 1%. Therefore, Iran should provide the necessary political conditions for economic activities. There is no doubt that China's “One Belt, One Road” initiative is extremely attractive. China's economic aggregate is 10 trillion U.S. dollars, while Iran's economic aggregate is only 400 billion U.S. dollars. Various countries are working hard to participate in the initiative. The Iranian authorities should prepare for joining China's "Belt and Road" initiative and make some specific plans.

He believes that the starting point of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative is to ensure energy supply. Because China has territorial disputes with South China Sea countries, which causes hidden dangers in maritime routes, China needs to open up an onshore energy supply line. The “One Belt, One Road” initiative provided opportunities for Iran. Because Iran was located in the core area of Eurasia, it was an important transit country on the ancient Silk Road. But if the Iranian government cannot seize the opportunity to cooperate with China, China may adopt alternative routes, such as bypassing Iran and entering Europe through the Central Asia-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan route. Therefore, Bahram Amirahmadian believes that the Iranian government should actively participate in the “Belt and Road” initiative. Iran will be able to attract more investment, create new jobs, and promote trade, transit, transportation, storage and Activities of port development and other departments. In short, by joining this initiative, Iran will be able to greatly develop its economy.

The Foreign Policy Research Office under the Strategic Research Center of Iran's famous think tank raised concerns about Iran's participation in the “Belt and Road” initiative in the article “The Belt and Road Initiative and the Road and Capabilities of the Islamic Republic of Iran”. The article pointed out that Iran is located in the Central Asia-China-West Asia Corridor, which is one of the main axes of the Silk Road. However, the Central Asia-China-West Asia Corridor is the least active corridor in the construction of the “Belt and Road”. Iran's role in the “Belt and Road” initiative is not clearly stipulated in the law or any specific strategy; China is concerned about the sanctions imposed by the international community on Iran and restricts investment in Iran to reduce the impact of sanctions on Chinese investors; On the road of long-term cooperation projects required by the "Belt and Road" initiative, some legal flaws in Iran have hindered this process.

In 2020, China and the Islamic Republic of Iran reached a 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan, deepening the strategic partnership. The Foreign Policy Research Office under the Strategic Research Center believes that the conditions for China and Iran to reach a 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan are not mature. China and Iran are two ancient Asian civilizations that have developed since the 21st century. On the one hand, the two countries are moving toward cooperation due to the unprecedented sanctions imposed by the West, especially the United States, on Iran; on the other hand,

Beijing's efforts to ensure energy security and Political stability in the western periphery. Although the Tehran and Beijing authorities are willing to complete a 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan, there is a desire to strengthen strategic cooperation in various fields. However, because Chinese companies are worried about US sanctions, the Chinese government must also consider that cooperation with Iran will not undermine its ties with strategic partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Therefore, the conditions for reaching a comprehensive strategic agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China have not yet been met.

Hamidreza Azizi, a lecturer at Shahid Beheshti University and a researcher at The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS), from geopolitics From an academic point of view, China's "One Belt One Road" initiative centers on Central Asia and competes economically with Iran in the region. Hamidreza Azizi believes that of all the routes proposed by the "Belt and Road" initiative, the Central Asian region plays a pivotal role in the initiative. Because the "One Belt, One Road" initiative was first proposed when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan in 2013. If Central Asia is the center, then China will have security and economic impacts on Iran. In the security field, China and Iran share common interests in Central Asian countries and can cooperate. But in the economic field, China is actually Iran's competitor in the region and monopolizes Iran's previous market.

If Central Asia is at the center of the "Belt and Road" initiative, then the initiative can be positioned as part of China's grand strategy, and China can use Central Asia to enhance its global strength. Because Central Asia is the only region among China's neighboring countries to resolve border disputes with neighboring countries, the United States has no military presence in this region, and Russia, as the traditional dominant force, has entered a period of decline. China's view of Central Asia as the core area of the "One Belt, One Road" is also the embodiment of the "Westward" strategy proposed by Chinese scholar Wang Jisi at the level of China's national policy.

Masoud Rezaei, a visiting researcher at Tehran's Middle East Institute for Strategic Studies (CMESS), believes that China and Iran should strengthen cooperation. As the Iranian nuclear issue makes the country's foreign policy uncertain, China has doubts when it comes to cooperation with Iran. Especially the cooperation between Iran and India in Chabahar port, and the cooperation agreement reached by Iran, India and Afghanistan. The cooperation between Iran and India at Chabahar Port and the flagship project of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, constituted a competitive relationship, which caused dissatisfaction in China. The author believes that Iran occupies an important position in the "Belt and Road" initiative due to its geo-strategic position, and China and Iran should strengthen communication and cooperation.

Vali Kaleji, an expert at the Iranian Center for Strategic Research (CSR), believes that unlike Iran, Pakistan has received considerable attention in the "Belt and Road" initiative. China's official documents claim that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor are closely related to the "Belt and Road" initiative. At the same time, China has invested US\$46 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. However, Iran's position in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative is not clear. Compared with Pakistan, there are many ambiguities. Iran's status in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative is generally limited. Therefore, the Iranian government must act like Pakistan and require China to determine an appropriate position for Iran on the land and sea routes of the Silk Road. And allocate the required budget for each plan. Otherwise, Iran's role in China's "One Belt One Road" initiative will be very limited.

### **3. Factors influencing Iranian elites' perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative**

#### ***3.1 Iran's historical position on the ancient Silk Road***

Historically, the exchange between Iran and China began in the late 2nd century BC. In the long history of the exchange between the two civilizations along the Silk Road, Chinese silk was the most important trade commodity. Iranians mainly play the role of middleman in the trade between East and West (or modern China and the EU). In addition to trade, Manichaeism and Persian music have also entered China, and many Chinese arts have also entered Persian culture and civilization. The connection between the two countries was particularly close in the 13th century, when the Mongol Empire ruled over most of Eurasia. However, since the 15th century, the land route of the Silk Road has gradually lost its privileges and has been replaced by maritime trade routes. This shift has pushed Iran to the brink of global trade.

The “Belt and Road Initiative” can restore Iran’s historical position as a bridge between the East and the West on the ancient Silk Road. On the ancient Silk Road, Iran played a role of connecting China and Europe to some extent. However, as global trade turned to sea routes and the decline of Persia and Chinese empires, Iran lost its status as a transportation hub, and Iran was pushed to the edge of global trade. Among the six corridors of the “Belt and Road” initiative, one passes through Iran, which to a certain extent helps Iran to restore its historical position in global trade.

Under the "Belt and Road" initiative, energy infrastructure investment is one of the important areas of cooperation between China and countries along the route. Therefore, China has always been one of Iran's major foreign investors. China's investment involves various sectors ranging from energy to transportation. China has invested in a number of energy projects in Iran, including the South Pars gas field and the Abadan refinery.

### **3.2 The “Belt and Road” Initiative has promoted Iran’s economy and politics**

The “Belt and Road” initiative is an important driving force for Iran to enhance its geopolitical and geoeconomic status. Iran has links with Central and South Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The aforementioned regions, especially South Asia and the Middle East, are among the poorest and most unstable regions in the world.

The “Belt and Road” initiative helps reduce poverty and instability in the surrounding areas of Iran. In recent years, China has become the most important investor and major trading partner of most of Iran’s neighboring countries. First, China is an important trading partner and investor of Russia and important countries. Secondly, China is a country in the Persian Gulf region with close energy trade and one of the main buyers of oil. Finally, China has promoted Pakistan's economic development and social stability through the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" plan.

### **3.3 Iran's historical baggage**

The history of Iran includes both the glorious history of the Persian Empire, as well as the history of foreign invasions and modern humiliation. The consequences of its political psychology are the two cognitive, emotional and attitude modes of the mentality of a great power and the mentality of the victims, which are manifested in pride and pride. The national psychology of pride and self-confidence, the cognitive characteristics of being overly sensitive to external threats and exaggerating threats, the negative emotions and attitudes toward power, and the psychological characteristics of identifying and sympathizing with the weak who resist power. Iran's position and attitude on issues involving nuclear disputes and the international system are, to a large extent, the external manifestation of its special national psychology.

Since China first proposed the “Belt and Road” initiative in 2013, Iran, as a major Silk Road country, has shown strong interest in it, because Iran itself played an important role on the ancient Silk Road. This initiative has awakened Iran’s attention to itself. Historical memory. However, due to the two completely different mental models of Iran’s great power mentality and the mentality of victims, Iran’s perception of the “Belt and Road” initiative is divergent.

## **4. Conclusion**

Since the “Belt and Road” initiative was put forward, the attitude of the elites towards the initiative has been relatively complicated. Although Iran has an important position on the ancient Silk Road, active participation in the "Belt and Road" initiative is also conducive to Iran's political and economic development. However, due to the historical baggage that exists in the historical development of Iran, this dual perception will continue to exist for a long time.

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