

THE BRI, Iran, AND THEIR PORTRAYAL IN THE IRANIAN NEWS MEDIA

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The Iranian news media promote four major narratives regarding the Sino-Iranian cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2016, the two countries signed a 25-year comprehensive strategic agreement which includes cooperation in the BRI forging a strategic partnership.¹ Despite this agreement, the strategic partnership between the two states should not be exaggerated since their strategic partnership has more discursive rather than material significance. This bilateral agreement was signed after the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which promised sanctions relief for Iran. China has been Iran's biggest trade partner even when Iran was under sanctions before the JCPOA. Nameh News, an Iranian news site has described China as "the friend during the difficult sanctions times."² The Iranian media in both political camps have reflected the official positions asserting Iran's dedication to the success of the BRI. Iranian leaders' appreciation of the Chinese support during the sanctions should at least partly explain why Iran is dedicated to the BRI. During the Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran in January 2016, the Iranian Supreme Leader said, "Iran would never forget Chinese support during the sanctions."³ In response to this, the Chinese president asserted that his country is ready to develop mutual cooperation across the board after the lifting of sanctions just like when China was on the side of Iran during the sanctions.⁴

The Sino-Iranian cooperation on the BRI also reflects a shared geopolitical objective, that is, curbing the American influence in the immediate regions of China and Iran. During his meeting with Xi Jinping, Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized the necessity of the revival of the Silk Road, adding that the hegemonic policies of some countries, particularly the US, have led

independent countries to pursue closer partnership with each other, and that Iran and China have signed the 25-year strategic agreement in that context.⁵ Sharing Ayatollah Khamenei's view, Xi Jinping said: "Certain superpowers are seeking to impose monopoly and the jungle policy of 'either with us or against us', [on other nations] but the progress of emerging economies has stripped them of the monopoly on power and has [instead] created a proper atmosphere for [the promotion of] the ideas and policies of independent governments."⁶ Both countries have a history of troublesome relations with Western powers.

Discursive framework

The historical role of Iran in the Silk Road provides the master frame for the narrative of Iran's role in the BRI. The Iranian news media often reference the centrality of ancient Persian empires in the ancient Silk Road when discussing Iran's role in the BRI. Top Iranian officials have expressed this view in the past. In 2016, for example, President Hassan Rouhani stated that "the revival of the Silk Road is highly important for regional development and economic cooperation, and Iran is ready to repeat its historical role."⁷

Even though the Iranian media are generally positive about the expected outcomes of Iran's involvement in the BRI, there is scepticism with regard to the success of the initiative and benefits of the initiative for Iran. There are at least four reasons for this scepticism: first, geopolitical rivalries, second, uneven economic and infrastructural development across the Eurasia which could impede coordination between China and other countries along the BRI, third, concerns about China's ability to provide enough investments in BRI projects, and fourth, doubts about China's strategic intentions behind the development of the BRI.⁸ Sometimes, however, scepticism about China's intentions border on cynicism. For example, an opinion published in Shargh Daily argued that China and Saudi Arabia are planning on excluding Iran from the BRI, warning that Iran will be "absent" in the new Silk Road.⁹ Despite China's

recognition that Iran used to be a main gateway to Europe for Chinese goods, and therefore should remain a major actor in the revival of the ancient Silk Road too, there are doubts whether or not the Chinese leadership will decide to include Iran in the BRI.¹⁰

An analysis of the Iranian news media reveals four basic discursive narratives in connection with Iran's perception of its role in the BRI:

A. Energy hub

The most prominent narrative in this discourse is concerned with Iran's capacity as BRI's major energy supplier. Iran's role as the energy hub in the BRI would serve two purposes; In addition to supplying energy to the countries along the BRI, Iran would facilitate their access to oil and gas reserves in the Persian Gulf as well. The inclusion of Iran in the China - Central Asia - West Asia Economic Corridor ties to its role as the energy hub. This corridor covers a vast region rich in oil, gas and minerals, and is supposed to "serve as a resource/energy source for China."¹¹ Iran holds the fourth largest oil reserves in the world, and its natural gas reserves account for eighteen percent of total global gas reserves. To emphasize this, the domestic media have described Iran as "the heartland of energy." Such descriptions imply two characteristics of Iran in the context of the country's role in the BRI: the geostrategic position of Iran that is of high value for the BRI, and China's view of Iran as the main supplier of energy for the BRI. China has viewed Iran as an energy hub since the development of its "Going out" strategy which dates back to the 1990s. Donya -ye- Eqtesad reports that Chinese investors see great potentials in turning Iran into "the petrochemical heart of the world."¹² According to this report, the Chinese have decided that Iran provides the most suitable site for developing a petrochemical park, hence China's interest in developing the Mokran petrochemical park nearby Chabahar.

The Iranian media, however, identify Iran's changing macro policies as a concern for Chinese investors in the country's energy sector. The media assert that China's criteria for the inclusion of countries in the BRI are grounded in geostrategic and geoeconomic gains and not on ideological alignments.

As far as energy resources are concerned, China needs Iran for at least two reasons: first, to maintain a free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, and second, to provide for the BRI's energy security. China is aware of the vulnerabilities of the Strait of Malacca when it comes to its energy needs due to the heavy American surveillance in that waterway. For this reason, in times of crisis in the Strait of Malacca, Iran would provide a lifeline to China through the Iran-Pakistan pipeline as well as the gas pipeline that sends Iranian gas to China through Turkmenistan.¹³ During their meeting in 2016, the Iranian Supreme Leader gave the Chinese President Xi Jinping categorical assurance about the reliability of Iran when it comes to energy supply, saying: "Iran is the only independent country in the region that can be trusted upon in the field of energy, because unlike certain countries in the region, Iran's energy policy is not influenced by any non-Iranian factor."¹⁴

B. Vital link

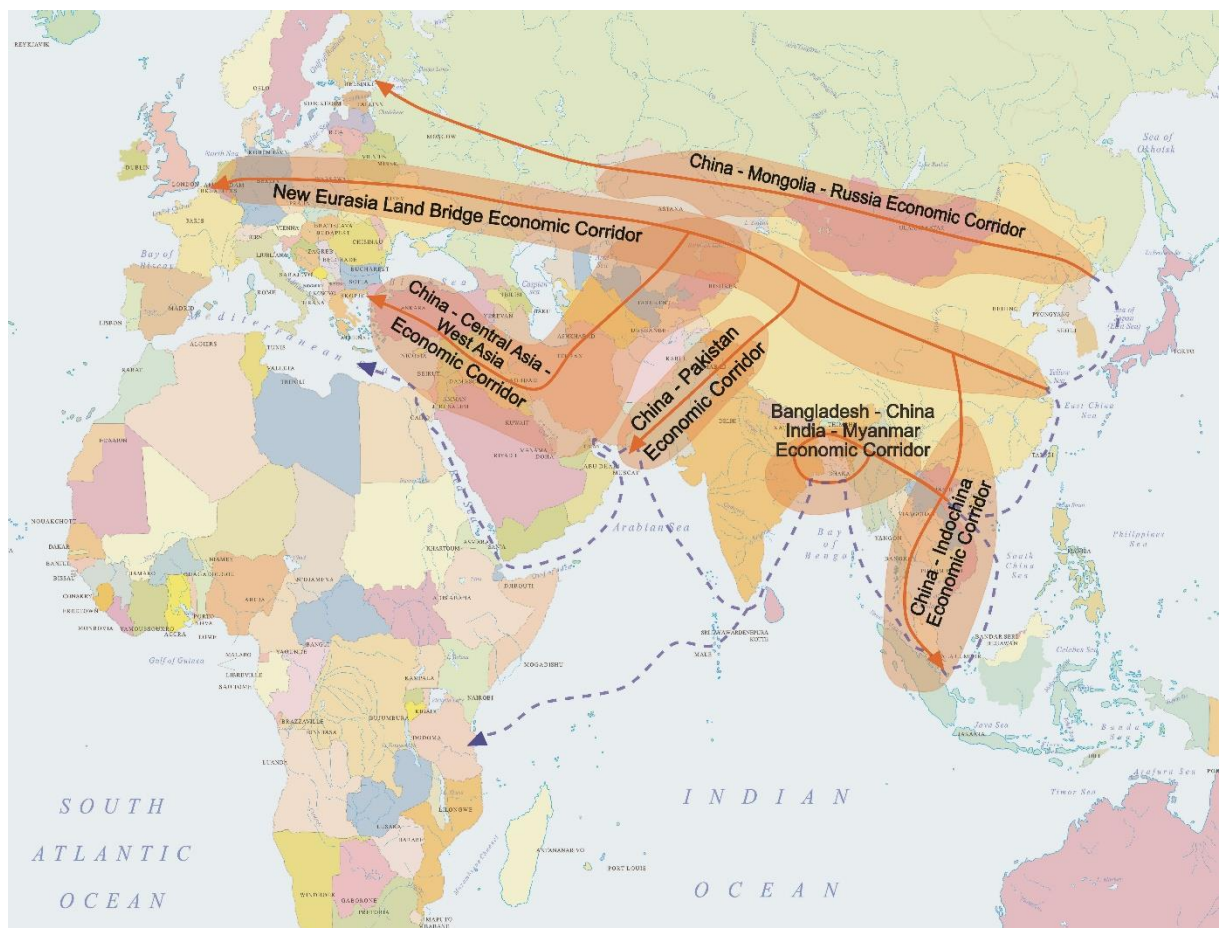
Another recurring theme in this discourse is the role of Iran as a link between different geographic regions and entities. The BRI envisions Iran as "the vital land-based and maritime link" between China and West Asia as well as Europe. This perception is tied to the claim that Iran's geographic position allows the international corridors going through its borders to conjoin. This perception can be supported by the extent of Iranian terrestrial surface (Image 1) that covers a vast area connecting the Caspian Sea, the largest inland sea, and the open waters of Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. Through the Iranian territory landlocked countries located

in Central Asia and Caucasia would have access to open waters. Iran would provide such connections by linking different transit corridors entering its borders.

In the context of the BRI, serving as a 'link' implies that Iran would be a distributor of goods moved along the China-Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor. Iran has land and maritime borders with fifteen countries, which makes it a potential contributor to trade flows in Central and West Asia. Furthermore, according to the Iranian Ports and Maritime Organization, three international corridors have been planned to go through the Iranian territory: (1) Asia's Southern Corridor, (2) International North-South Transport Corridor, and (3) China-Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor.¹⁵ Some have argued that the Iranian capital, as one of the centers of the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Corridor, will be a great beneficiary of inter-corridor connectivity.¹⁶ By intermediating trade flows, Iran can speed up delivery of cargos to countries in Central Asia and Caucasia. These geographic features point towards the centrality of Iran to the BRI's objective of strengthening global connectivity through six economic corridors. Strengthening connectivity would bring economic advantages to corridor centers, which would, in turn, increase overall connectivity among the BRI countries.¹⁷

Significant reduction of transit times as well as transit and logistics costs is another advantage that Iran can offer. It has been estimated that upon the completion of the China-Central Asia West Asia Economic Corridor, cargo transit times from eastern China to Iran would be halved compared to when they are transported by sea.¹⁸ In this regard, the role of Maku Free Trade and Industrial Zone as "Asia's gateway to Europe"¹⁹ and as a potential "logistic hub for the Chinese"²⁰ has been emphasized in the Iranian media. A railway connecting Northwest China to Tehran has already proven time-saving in cargo transit.²¹ Also, Iran would provide the most economical link between China and Europe through 2000 kilometres of overland and freight routes.²²

Highlighting the centrality of Iran to the BRI, Iranian officials have maintained that the BRI cannot achieve its objectives if China relies on Pakistani ports alone. Therefore, Iranians have argued that China should invest in the port of Chabahar as well as in Iranian transportation infrastructure to be able to benefit from Iran's geostrategic position. Some in Iran has made this argument knowing that their country has missed the opportunity to become China's "primary base" in the BRI. Now they expect that Iran becomes the second most important base in the BRI behind Pakistan.²³ Some Iranian officials have even argued that Iran should "transform its economic structure" to be able to attract Chinese investors and ultimately make the most of the BRI.²⁴



Source: [Tim Winter, 2016](#)

Noting the potential geoeconomic gains of Iranian geography in the BRI, the Iranian media hold that Iran can become the geoeconomic highway in the initiative. According to the media, however, Iran's success in gaining the benefits of its geostrategic position depends on having a reliable transportation infrastructure and its ability to connect different economic corridors entering its borders. Media reports emphasize Iran's readiness to link the corridors of the BRI to the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Europe by land and sea. In this regard, Iran would connect the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to the East-West Corridor, which is also referred to as the "Silk Road" in the Iranian media. In the coverage of the second Belt and Road Forum, the IRIB News stated that Xi Jinping has described Iran as the "great transit route" in the BRI which Beijing cannot ignore.²⁵ While not surprising, the Iranian media often explain such positions by noting that China has a great interest in Iran's access to the Caspian Sea in the north and the open waters of the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman in the south.

The Iranian media have frequently reported on Iran's willingness to co-ordinate its domestic transportation policies with China's interests within the framework of the BRI. As the former Minister of Roads and Urban Development Abbas Ahmad Akhoundi said, Iran's extensive investments in the international corridors that go through the country is the major policy of the Islamic Republic, which, he thinks, "would be in line with the Republic of China's Silk Road policy."²⁶ Iran would ensure China's linkage to the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Europe by connecting multiple corridors that pass through the country including Chabahar-Sarakhs railway and the North-South Transport Corridor of the INSTC to the BRI's China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. This way, Iran would support the BRI by providing "inter-corridor connectivity" with other economic corridors. Also, Iran can connect landlocked countries in Central Asia to open waters.²⁷

According to the media, Iran is able to resist foreign economic sanctions through creating inter-corridor connectivity. By tying its interests to the interests of other countries including

China, India and Russia, Iran would increase the costs of sanction regimes for the United States. This, in turn, could cause countries with mutual interests with Iran to increase pressure on the US.

However, some analysts have argued that Iran should not only focus its attention to playing a role as a transit corridor in the BRI, rather the Iranian leadership should view this initiative as an opportunity to expand its trade and commercial relations not only with China but also with other countries along the BRI.²⁸

Some Iranian experts have argued that Iran can transform its geographic position into a geopolitical advantage once it establishes itself as the link between China and the Middle East and Europe.²⁹ In this way, Iran will be “the centre of gravity” in the land route of the BRI.³⁰

C. Silk Road urban connectivity

The question of strengthening ties between Iranian and Chinese cities and provinces along the Silk Road is another theme of this discourse. According to the Iranian media, the Belt and Road Initiative would not only open up avenues of cooperation between states but also for provinces, cities and smaller localities among the member countries. Silk Road cities and provinces can play an important role in the revival of the Silk Road through an exchange of industrial and technological knowledge in addition to expansion of cultural relations and tourism among themselves.

Moreover, the Iranian media, both Conservative and Reformist, have argued that the BRI offers an opportunity for Iran to develop mutual economic and diplomatic relations with countries with whom Iran has historical and cultural ties. Iran has a vested interest in an active engagement in Central Asia due to shared history as well as linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic ties with countries in that region.³¹ Media’s attention to shared demographic and sociocultural ties with other countries along the BRI point towards potential opportunities for

the Iranian government to engage in “civilizational interaction.”³² This form of public diplomacy, “while serving national interest of the sovereign state, also contributes to peace and harmony of the world.”³³ Engaging in such a practice would help Iran to create an attractive image and show an appreciation for developing relations with other nations based on historical and sociocultural commonalities.

The media also contend that the BRI can boost regional collaboration among Iranian cities (e.g., Isfahan and Qazvin) and Chinese cities (e.g., Fuzhou) along the BRI, and this, in turn, will help the strengthening of commercial and cultural relations between Iran and China at the state level. Enhancing people-to-people connectivity among countries and regions along the BRI is one of the objectives of the initiative which can be improved through public diplomacy.

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