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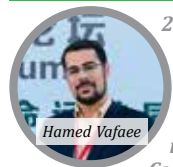
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Elite dialogue forum could enrich Iran-China mutual understanding

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

INTERVIEW



Iran-China relations have entered a new phase in recent years. The two countries signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement in 2021 aimed at elevating bilateral relations to the level of a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in economic, energy, technological, cultural, and security domains. In addition, through joint membership in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, Tehran and Beijing, alongside other states, have formed a type of non-Western alignment. Such close cooperation has underscored the need for sustained dialogue at expert and elite levels.

The "Iran-China Dialogue Forum," now in its third round, represents the most important framework for elite-level engagement between research centers, think tanks, and specialists from both countries.

In this context, Iran Daily spoke with Hamed Vafaei, a China affairs analyst who attended the forum. Vafaei noted that such gatherings are highly effective in furthering mutual understanding, building trust, and strengthening the strategic relationship between the two countries, though deeper engagement and more detailed discussions will be required in subsequent stages.

IRAN DAILY: What role do such forums play in strengthening mutual political trust between the two countries, and how can this trust be sustained? How can these exchanges among scholars and think tanks be translated into executive decision-making?

VAFAEE: Iran and China have elevated their relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership for more than a decade, yet it appears that the potential of bilateral ties goes well beyond the current framework. A review of existing cooperation structures suggests that there remains ample space for the formation of deeper strategic trust between the two sides.

To make use of this potential, various mechanisms are available. Achieving a genuine strategic relationship requires passing through three stages: mutual understanding, mutual trust, and finally a strategic partnership. These forums are highly effective across all three stages.

They provide Iranian and Chinese experts with the opportunity to engage in direct, unmediated dialogue, exchange views, and discuss the most important bilateral issues face to face.

One of the longstanding challenges in Iran-China relations has been the dominance of Western intermediaries in shaping mutual perceptions. For many years, Western sources served as a primary lens through which Iran understood China and vice versa. The establishment of such a forum — now in its third round — significantly helps do away with mediated narratives and pave the way for direct and independent dialogue.

Both Iran and China have a strong need for the continuation of these exchanges, and the fact that the forum has reached its third round reflects the shared interest of both sides in keeping the dialogue alive.

In the next phase, the key priority should be to deepen discussions and move toward more issue-specific engagement. The forum could be divided into more specialized sub-groups, creating greater opportunities for detailed and focused exchanges among Iranian and Chinese experts and think tanks.

There is a well-known Chinese proverb that says it is better to work deeply on a small issue than to work superficially on a large one.

The forum included think tanks affiliated with governance structures in both countries as well as independent and academic institutions, each of which exerts influence at different layers of policymaking. Therefore, the successful holding of such forums will undoubtedly contribute to a deeper mutual understanding between Iran and China.

At a time when the West is seeking to isolate Iran financially and technologically, what capacities do Iran-China technological cooperation offer to neutralize these pressures?

One of the most prominent issues currently on the Iran-China agenda is cooperation in science and technology. A review of China's top-level policy documents reveals a key concept known as "openness of science and technology to the outside world," which constitutes one of Beijing's foundational policies in engaging with developing countries, including Iran.

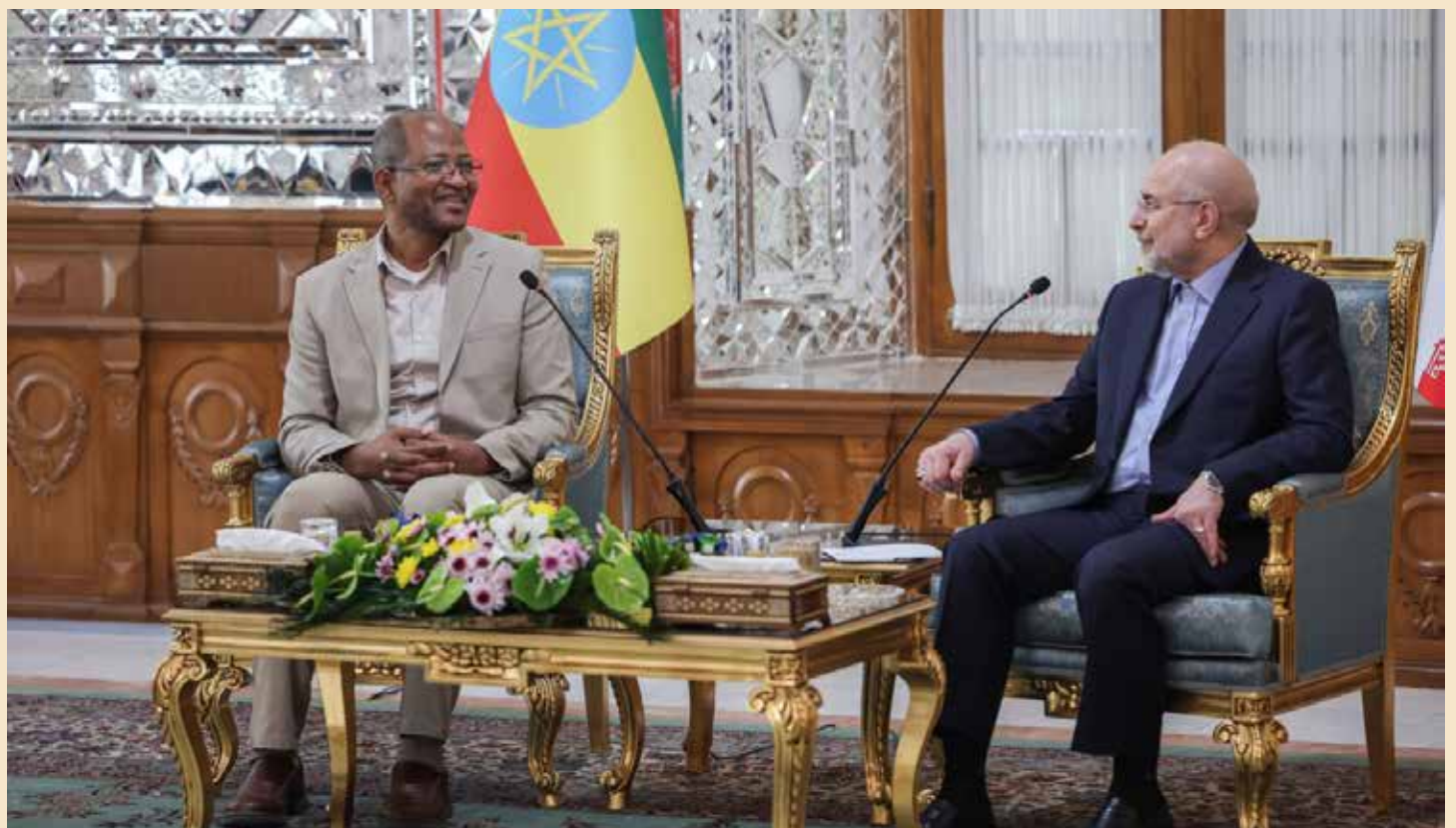
China possesses extensive capabilities in science and technology and, in some fields, has moved ahead of Western countries and even the United States. Many Western states are themselves seeking to tap into China's capacities in areas such as aerospace, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, rare earth minerals, and other advanced sectors, and are in constant consultation with Beijing.

Iran, too, should leverage China's capabilities by closely studying China's governance documents and policy principles, including the openness of science and technology, to make effective use of these opportunities.

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Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf (R) meets with Speaker of Ethiopia's House of Representatives Tadesse Chafu in Tehran on December 13, 2025.
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