

55 years of Iran-China relations

Test of a strategic partnership



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INTERVIEW

To mark the anniversary of Iran-China diplomatic relations, Iran Daily conducted an exclusive interview with Mohammadreza Elhami, vice president of the Iran-China Friendship Association, about more than five decades of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Beijing, the two nations' seemingly divergent conceptions of strategic partnership, Beijing's conduct during the recent war, and the outlook for their bilateral relations.

Mohammadreza Elhami



Iran and China just celebrated the 55th anniversary of the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, a relationship that, over the last five decades, has expanded from political and economic cooperation to energy, trade, and regional affairs. Naturally, in recent years, this relationship with the eastern superpower has assumed greater significance for Tehran amid the intensification of Western sanctions. Nevertheless, alongside the depth of bilateral ties, questions persist regarding the extent to which the relationship's potential has been realized and, in particular, what "strategic partnership" means for the two sides. The recent Iran-US war also once again underscored the question of how far China is willing to incur costs for its relations with Iran at critical junctures and where it places its own interests above Tehran's expectations.

IRAN DAILY: Iran and China just celebrated the 55th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. So, this is an appropriate opportunity to assess the evolution of these ties. When did these formal relations begin, and what trajectory have they followed?

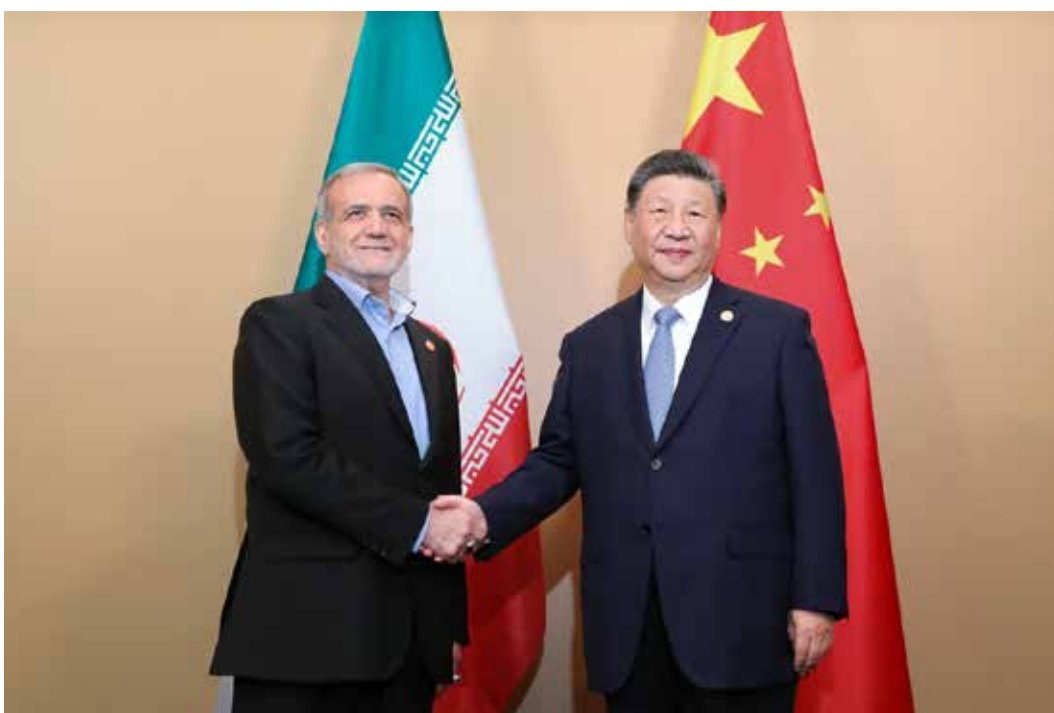
ELHAMI: If we are to examine the history of formal diplomatic relations between Iran and the People's Republic of China, we must identify 1971 as their point of inception. Formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established that year, and they have continued to the present day.

Of course, contact between Iran and China has a far more extensive history and dates back to ancient times, but formal political relations between the two countries in the modern era commenced in 1971.

At that time, too, the establishment of Iran's relations with the People's Republic of China took place under particular international circumstances. The People's Republic of China had been established in 1949, but for years a substantial proportion of Western countries did not recognize it and regarded the Republic of China, based in Taiwan, as China's representative. Iran, too, belonged to the Western bloc and maintained close relations with the United States.

During the 1970s, China-US relations also entered a new phase. Nixon's visit to China, Henry Kissinger's diplomatic efforts, and the developments known as "ping-pong diplomacy" created the conditions for the normalization of relations between Beijing and Washington. Ping-pong diplomacy refers to the talks between the United States and China during the 1970s. At that time, the two countries still lacked formal diplomatic relations with one another and used the staging of a table-tennis tournament as a pretext for conducting negotiations. In such an environment, Iran also established formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1971. Following the Islamic Revolution, relations between the two countries continued, and in 1981, the first ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran was dispatched to China. Therefore, if we consider the entirety of formal relations, we are now celebrating 55 years of diplomatic ties, and if we examine the period of the Islamic Republic, approximately 45 years of the two countries' formal relations have elapsed under the current establishments.

Over these 55 years, can Iran-China relations genuinely be considered a "strategic partnership"? In Iran, at least,



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) shakes hands with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, at the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23, 2024.

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China has never placed Iran in a position comparable to that of certain of its particular partners in the sense that we, in Iran, expect of a strategic partner. The reason is also largely attributable to the divergence in the two countries' objectives and circumstances. We cannot expect China, under circumstances in which it maintains extensive economic relations with the United States and Western countries, to act toward Iran in a manner that would place all those interests at risk.

China is generally regarded as one of the country's strategic partners.

Here, we must distinguish between Iran's conception of "strategic partnership" and China's definition of the concept. China has never placed Iran in a position comparable to that of certain of its particular partners in the sense that we, in Iran, expect of a strategic partner. For example, China maintains relations with Pakistan that are exceptionally deep and strategic in certain domains, with extensive military, security, and economic cooperation between them. A comparable level of relations has not developed in the case of Iran.

The reason is also largely attributable to the divergence in the two countries' objectives and circumstances. Beginning in the late 1970s, China adopted a poli-

cy of reform and opening-up and gradually expanded its economic relations with the United States, Europe, and the wider world. During the same period, Iran's relations with the United States were severed following the 1979 Revolution, and Iran and the United States also became two of the most significant adversaries of one another.

Therefore, we cannot expect China, under circumstances in which it maintains extensive economic relations with the United States and Western countries, to act toward Iran in a manner that would place all those interests at risk.

So, should one of the principal reasons for China's caution be sought in its relationship with the United States?

Yes, that is one of the most im-

portant factors. Of course, China-US relations today are themselves characterized by highly serious competition, but the two countries nevertheless maintain extremely extensive economic relations.

While competing with the United States, China seeks to preserve its economic and strategic interests. It therefore does not want its relationship with Iran to assume a form that would eliminate all its capacity for engagement with the United States and Europe.

This issue assumes particular importance under sanctions. The Chinese government may maintain good political relations with Iran and even cooperate in certain areas, but many major Chinese companies are multinational corporations and possess extensive interests in global markets. These companies cannot

readily accept the risks associated with US sanctions.

For this reason, even during periods when the Iranian government has demonstrated a strong inclination to develop relations with China, we have encountered constraints in areas such as finance and investment.

Nevertheless, in recent years, particularly during the sanctions period, China has been one of the few countries that has continued purchasing Iranian oil. Should this action be regarded as China's strategic support for Iran?

The purchase of Iranian oil is, to some extent, an economic necessity for China and, to some extent, may be analyzed within the framework of assisting Iran in navigating the pressures of sanctions; ultimately, however, a reciprocal interest exists. China requires oil, and Iran requires a market for selling its oil. Therefore, this relationship cannot be construed solely as a political or supportive action on China's part. In many instances, China has sought to cooperate with Iran within the framework of its own interests, while simultaneously asking Tehran not to become embroiled in tensions with regional countries.

In this context, the recent Iran-US war was an important test for Tehran-Beijing relations. In your view, did China demonstrate the support that Iran expected from a strategic partner during this war?

If our criterion for strategic partnership is military support and direct involvement in security conflicts, my answer is no. China did not assume such a role toward Iran, and, fundamentally, expecting such a level of support from Beijing is unrealistic. China shares political positions with Iran on certain issues, including opposition to US hegemony and support for the emergence of a multipolar international order. This does not, however, mean that China will enter the field in every military conflict involving Iran or place its military capabilities and sensitive technologies at Iran's disposal. Again, for example, China maintains a different level of cooperation in its military relations with Pakistan and provides that country with advanced military equipment and technology. No such model exists in its relationship with Iran. We must therefore distinguish between political alignment on certain issues and a strategic and security alliance.

China simultaneously maintains extensive relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab countries of the



A woman holds up ping-pong paddles with images of then-US president Richard Nixon (L) and then-Chinese chairman Mao Zedong, in Dortmund, Germany, in 1971, to signify the historic thawing of relations between the two countries through "Ping Pong Diplomacy".

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