



After signing the 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement in Tehran on March 27, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (L) and his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, bump elbows to observe health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Persian Gulf. Do these relations affect the nature of Beijing's engagement with Tehran?

Yes. China acts in pursuit of its own national interests, and this is entirely natural. Iran is important to China, but China does not formulate its Middle East policy solely on the basis of its relationship with Iran.

Beijing maintains important economic and strategic relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other countries in the region. China also purchases these countries' oil and attaches importance to their markets, investments, and infrastructure projects.

China's role in normalizing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia also demonstrated that Beijing seeks to increase its influence in the region while maintaining ties with all major regional actors. China therefore does not want to choose between Iran and the Arab countries. Its policy is based more on equilibrium and the preservation of relations with all sides.

In Iran, expectations of China regarding issues such as war or regional affairs are sometimes higher than what we observe from it in practice. Should Iran revise its expectations of China?

In my view, yes. We must adopt a more realistic perspective on the relationship. China formulates its foreign policy on the basis of its own national interests. It does not pursue a hostile policy toward Iran and, unlike the United States, its approach is fundamentally not based on confrontation with Iran. This does not, howev-

er, mean that China will set aside its own interests to secure Iran's interests.

It is better to characterize China's policy as "cautious," rather than hostile. If China concludes that a deeper relationship with Iran serves its own national interests, it will certainly develop that relationship. If, however, it believes that a particular form of cooperation with Iran would result in the loss of more important interests in the United States, Europe, or the region, it will naturally exercise caution.

So, perhaps part of the problem stems from the fact that Iran and China have different expectations of the concept of strategic partnership?

Precisely. In Iran, when we speak of strategic partnership, we sometimes expect that this partnership should manifest itself across all domains, from the economy and investment to military and political affairs. From China's perspective, however, strategic partnership does not necessarily entail the acceptance of unlimited risk. China seeks cooperation that also generates economic and strategic benefits for itself.

For this reason, the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China, by itself, cannot transform the two countries into a strategic partnership in the sense expected by Iran. This agreement has considerable potential for cooperation, but a significant portion of it has not reached the implementation stage.

Why, despite the 25-year co-

operation agreement, have the objectives of this program and Chinese investment in Iran have not materialized in proportion to the expectations it generated?

Here, we must consider both Iran's problems and China's constraints. Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has undertaken extremely large investments in various countries, from Central Asia and Pakistan to Arab countries. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was even established to finance infrastructure projects. Iran has not been able to utilize these capacities as it should have. China, for its part, has entered Iranian projects cautiously because of sanctions, financial difficulties, FATF, and its companies' concerns about US penalties. Therefore, the problem is not simply that China does not want to invest in Iran. Iran's economic environment must also be made conducive to foreign investment. As we have seen, during periods when Iran's relations with the West were more normalized, Chinese and European companies entered Iran with greater confidence, but following the reimposition of sanctions, many of them withdrew.

If that is the case, what must Iran do to transform its relationship with China into genuine, long-term economic cooperation?

In my view, the most important issue is that Iran must move away from a zigzag foreign policy. We should not incline excessively toward the East one day and excessively toward the West the

next. Specifically, by inclination toward the West, I mean periods such as the JCPOA, when we become inattentive to the East. The correct policy for Iran, in my opinion, is a form of positive equilibrium; that is, we should maintain economic cooperation with both the East and the West without relinquishing our political independence.

China is the world's second most powerful country and a country that has not had a fundamental or hostile conflict with Iran over the past several decades. China can therefore constitute one of the important pillars of Iran's foreign and economic relations, but we must not imagine that China is a substitute for the entire world. We must work with China while simultaneously developing our economic relations with Europe, regional countries, India, Japan, and other economic powers.

Could improved relations between Iran and the West, and even the resolution of hostility with the United States, really lead to stronger economic relations between Iran and China?

Yes. In fact, I believe this is one of the important points that must be taken into consideration in Iran. The more the pressure of sanctions is reduced and the more Iran is able to conduct normal economic activity within the framework of international regulations and mechanisms, the more easily Chinese companies will be able to work with Iran. Politically, China and Iran hold similar views on many issues, but the principal problem lies

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in the economic sphere. Chinese companies do not want to lose their major markets in the United States and Europe because of their activities in Iran. Therefore, the resolution of hostility and the reduction of sanctions could even create the conditions for greater investment and a larger presence of Chinese companies in Iran.

In this regard, what role could improved relations between Iran and regional countries and regional agreements — such as the joint defense agreement between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey — play in Tehran-Beijing relations?

In my view, reducing tensions between Iran and regional countries could represent a highly important opportunity. China has consistently asked Iran not to become embroiled in tensions with regional countries and to improve its relations with them. China welcomed the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and, in principle, the greater the stability in the region, the more favorable it is for China's economic and energy interests.

If Iran can normalize its relations with regional countries to a greater extent, this issue would not only pose no threat to its relationship with China but could also create the conditions for expanded Chinese cooperation with Iran. In fact, we must ensure that our relations with regional countries, and even the reduction of hostility with the United States, become an opportunity for developing economic relations with Beijing rather than a threat to our relationship with China.

Given that the span of diplomatic relations between the two countries has reached 55 years, if you were to offer one specific recommendation for the future of Iran-China relations, what would you say?

In my view, the most important issue is to move beyond the slogan of "strategic partnership" and toward mutual interests and practical cooperation. China is not Iran's enemy and does not pursue a hostile policy toward Iran, but China, like every other country, also pursues its own national interests first. If cooperation with Iran benefits China, Beijing will develop that cooperation.

Iran, for its part, must make its economic and legal environment more conducive to foreign investment, enhance regulatory stability, reduce banking and financial difficulties, and utilize China's capacities in areas such as infrastructure, technology, and investment.

Conversely, if China genuinely wishes to preserve and strengthen its position in Iran, it must go beyond a purely commercial relationship and the sale of goods and assume a more substantial presence in investment, technology transfer, industrial development, and the creation of productive capacity in Iran.

We must not view China merely as a market for selling oil or as a supplier of goods, and the Chinese must not regard Iran solely as a consumer market.

If the two countries can transform shared interests into reciprocal benefits and sustainable economic projects, Iran-China relations can then transcend the level of political and tactical relations and develop into a deeper and more durable relationship.



China's permanent representative to the United Nations Fu Cong (C) votes against an anti-Iran draft resolution on the Strait of Hormuz at the United Nations Security Council meeting in New York, on April 7, 2026.

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