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Between Religious Principlism and Pragmatism: Islamic Iran's Approach to Communist China

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Abstract

Beyond the geopolitical drivers underpinning Tehran-Beijing relations, the partnership between an Islamist state and a communist regime foregrounds significant religious-ideological dimensions. Iran's engagement with China aligns with its prevailing ideological and religious doctrine, offering a unique lens through which to analyze Sino-Persian relations. This paper introduces a novel perspective by examining these connections through a religious-ideological prism. The central question guiding the analysis is: How, and through what mechanisms, has Iran aligned its China policy with its religious-ideological codes? The paper contends that Shia jurisprudence provides distinct religious foundations that legitimize Iran's policy toward China. In particular, it emphasizes two interpretive frameworks - Principlism and Jurisprudential Pragmatism - through which Iran navigates its bilateral engagement. Principlism maintains that expanding ties with China does not contravene the religious injunction against domination by non-Muslim powers. Consequently, Iranian elites do not interpret China's growing influence as a form of neo-imperialism that threatens Muslim sovereignty. Jurisprudential Pragmatism, grounded in the Shia principle of expediency (*maslahat*), mitigates potential tensions between China's domestic policies toward its Muslim population and Iran's declared advocacy for Muslims globally. This pragmatic approach furnishes a religious justification for sustaining and expanding relations with Beijing.

Keywords: Iran's Foreign Policy, Ideals, Reality, Religious Doctrine, Non-Muslim Countries, Cooperation, Expediency.

Introduction

Iran's geopolitical significance as a pivotal country situated at the nexus of Asia, Europe, and Africa has made it a focal point for major powers seeking to expand their influence in West Asia and beyond. Located at the crossroads of Mackinder's 'Heartland' and Spykman's 'Rimland' (Mackinder, 1904; Spykman, 1942), Iran holds geostrategic importance in shaping regional dynamics and global geopolitics. Among these global players, China has emerged as a central figure in Iran's strategic landscape, forging deep and multifaceted ties with the Islamic Republic. Despite the considerable attention given to their security and military engagements, the analysis of the ideational underpinnings shaping Sino-Iranian relations has been notably lacking. Both Iran and China possess rich civilizational histories that have exerted significant soft power, drawing peoples and cultures into their respective orbits. The enduring allure of the "Idea of Iran" and the "Idea of China" underscores the profound cultural and ideological dimensions that underpin their relationship. Notably, both nations have undergone ideological revolutions, with Marxism shaping China's political landscape and political Islam guiding Iran's governance. While seemingly disparate, the enduring bond between these ideological systems illustrates how shared principles and pragmatic considerations can transcend superficial ideological differences. This begs the question: how do Iran's jurisprudential doctrines frame the religious justification for expanding relations with China? This is the central question that guides the analytical narrative of the present paper.

The hypothesis put forth in this paper posits that within the framework of Iran's political-religious discourse, the expansion of ties with China finds religious justification through two avenues: religious principlism and religious pragmatism. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this hypothesis does not discount the realist and pragmatic explanations that underpin Iran's foreign policy. While Iranian perceptions of global politics have evolved, rooted in specific historical contexts, enduring elements such as state-centric governance, security imperatives, and pragmatism persist across differing interpretations. From this perspective, this study seeks to provide a novel understanding of the ebb and flow of cultural and ideological bonds between Iran and China. By contextualizing Iran-China relations within a broader historical and cultural framework, this paper traces the exchange of ideas between these civilizations, from China's ambitious economic reforms to the

Islamic Republic's enduring diplomatic engagements. In doing so, it sheds light on the intricate dynamics that shape one of the most consequential relationships in contemporary international politics.

۱. ایران در مسیر راه ابریشم

Iran's historical significance along the path of the New Silk Road is deeply rooted in centuries of interaction with Chinese rulers, dating back to the Parthian dynasty in 230 B.C. This enduring connection reached its zenith during the Sassanid era, coinciding with the vibrant trade routes of the ancient Silk Road. (Frankopan, 2016) Both Iran and China, as enduring "state-civilizations," boast rich traditions of governance and cultural exchange. Evidence of the robust ties between these two ancient civilizations can be traced to historical accounts, such as Sassanid Shah Yazdgerd III's appeal to Emperor Tai Zong of the Tang dynasty for assistance against Arab invaders, highlighting a legacy of mutual support and diplomatic exchange. Even after the political upheavals that reshaped the Iranian plateau, communication and trade persisted along the Silk Road, leaving indelible imprints on both societies and civilizations. However, the colonial disruptions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to a period of marginalization for these once-great civilizations, as they grappled with the consequences of external domination on their political, economic, and cultural landscapes.

The modern era saw a recalibration of relations between Iran and China amidst the backdrop of the Cold War. Initially situated on opposing sides, with Mao's victory in the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the Shah's regime in Iran, the two nations found themselves at odds. Pahlavi Iran's alignment with the West led to a reluctance to recognize Communist China, while China viewed Iran as a proxy of imperialism. However, the geopolitical landscape shifted with the U.S. opening diplomatic channels with China in the early 1970s, prompting Tehran and Beijing to reassess their stances. Ashraf Pahlavi's pivotal visit to China in April 1971 heralded a new chapter in bilateral relations, marked by a surge in cooperative endeavors. This momentum culminated in Chinese Prime Minister Hua Guofeng's historic visit to Tehran in September 1978.

Amidst the turbulence following the Islamic Revolution and the harrowing Iran-Iraq War, Iranian revolutionary leaders faced a formidable challenge in safeguarding national security and stability. Recognizing the need for strategic alliances to bolster defense capabilities, Iran turned to China for crucial military support. A pivotal moment in this strategic realignment occurred with Hashemi

Rafsanjani's diplomatic mission to Beijing in July 1985. Rafsanjani's visit underscored Iran's pragmatic pivot toward China, symbolizing a calculated response to regional instability and external threats (Mesbahi & Homayounvash, 2016). This strategic maneuver not only reaffirmed Iran's commitment to defending its sovereignty but also highlighted the pragmatic imperative of forging alliances in pursuit of national interests amidst volatile geopolitical dynamics.

The conclusion of the Cold War era heralded significant shifts in the global security landscape, reshaping the dynamics between Iran and China. As China ascended as a prominent global power in the ۱۹۹۰s, bilateral economic ties between Iran and China flourished, with a particular emphasis on energy cooperation. Energy security emerged as a paramount concern for China, given its reliance on oil imports from the Persian Gulf to fuel its economic growth. The vulnerability of China's energy supply routes, compounded by the geopolitical proximity of the Persian Gulf oil-producing countries to Western powers, underscored the strategic importance of Iran as a key energy partner (Reisinezhad, 2021).

Iran's status as the world's second-largest oil and gas producer positioned it as a crucial source to meet China's burgeoning energy demands. Unlike other oil-rich nations in the region (Miller, 2017), Iran's independent management of its energy resources, free from Western influence, further bolstered its appeal to China. The imposition of stringent Western sanctions on Iran, particularly under the Trump administration, paved the way for China to deepen its economic ties and expand its influence within Iran's energy sector. Before the onset of sanctions, Iran consistently ranked among the top three oil exporters to China, with energy trade reaching unprecedented levels between 2011 and 2014 (Erickson & Collins, 2010).

The unveiling of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presented Iran with an opportunity to position itself as a key partner in this transformative project. (Kaplan, 2018) However, despite Iran's aspirations, a myriad of challenges, including international sanctions, dilapidated infrastructure, economic instability, and strained relations with the West, have hindered its ability to fully capitalize on its potential role within the BRI. The lack of consensus among Iranian policymakers regarding China's presence and the BRI further complicated matters, eroding Beijing's confidence in Iran's commitment to the initiative.

The withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear deal

and the subsequent reimposition of sweeping sanctions exacerbated Iran's challenges, particularly in terms of securing investment and infrastructure development necessary for effective participation in the BRI. Additionally, China's apprehension regarding Iran's reliability as a strategic partner has dampened prospects for meaningful collaboration within the framework of the BRI. (Glantz et al., 2019) Consequently, Iran's ability to leverage the BRI as a catalyst for economic revitalization and regional connectivity remains uncertain, underscoring the complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors shaping Iran-China relations in the contemporary era (Reisinezhad, 2021).

۲. چارچوب نظری و روش تحقیق

Examining Iran's foreign policy orientation toward a non-Muslim-friendly country like China has not been the subject of much research, and hence, it can be claimed that this research offers a significant innovation in this area. The current literature on Iran's relations with China could be classified into four categories. The first category includes studies that generally address the impact of national and religious culture on Iran's foreign policy. Major among them are *Independence Without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy* by Ruhi Ramazani, *Iranian Ideology and Worldview: Cultural Export of the Revolution* by Farhang Rajaee, *Free and Confined: Iran and the International System* by Mohiaddin Mesbahi, *Domestic Ideational Sources of Iran's Foreign Policy* by Homeira Moshirzadeh, *The Impact of National Culture on the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (2002) by Ahmad Naghibzadeh, and *The Islamic Republic's Cultural Diplomacy* by Mohammad-Reza Dehshiri. Though significant, these books and articles examine the specific influences of religious ideas and ideological elements not only in Iran's foreign policy but also in the mindset and behavior of Iranian people, institutions, and political agents, highlighting the dualistic thinking of good and evil that leads to an anti-oppression orientation (in a religious sense) and anti-hegemony (in a political sense).

The second category focuses on Iran-China relations. Major books and articles in English are *China and Iran: Ancient Partners in a Post-Imperial World* by John Graver, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations* by Scott Warren Harold and Alireza Nader; *Iran Looking East: An Alternative to the EU?* by Annalisa Perteghella; *Triple-Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China* by Arianne Tabatabaie and Dina Esfandiary; and *Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations* by

Shirzad Azad, as well as two articles, 'Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear' and 'Iran-China Cooperation in the Silk Road Economic Belt From Strategic Understanding to Operational Understanding' by Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi. There are also books in Persian, including China: Relations with Iran and the US by Behzad Shahandeh, A Perspective of China-Iran Relations by Hossein Asgarian, Iran and China Relations before and after the Islamic Revolution by Valiollah Hami Kalvanq, and Iran in China's Foreign Relations by Mohammad-Hossein Dehghanian. The main goal of this category is to unravel the hidden black box of the economic-political context as well as internal power struggles over Tehran's policy toward Beijing. These books and articles shed light onto the decision-making processes and institutional arrangements responsible for Iran's policy in the recent four decades.

The third category includes major books that explain the religious principles and rules governing the foreign policy of an Islamic state in a general sense. In this field, several works have been written in Farsi, particularly Diplomacy and International Behavior in Islam by Akhavan Kazemi, Foundations, Principles, and Purposes of the Foreign Policy of Islamic State by Haghghat, Meta-theoretical Foundations of Islamic Theory of International Relations by Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firooz Abadi, and Diplomacy and Political Behavior in Islam by Sajjadi. The last category focuses on the practical implications of principles, including Nafy-e Sabil, Tawalla and Tabarra, invitation, defending the lands and interests of Muslims (and other oppressed people) worldwide, Jihad, peaceful coexistence, keeping the promise, and expediency. Although these books are notable for taking a longer view of religious principles over Islamic states, relations with China are merely secondary topics in this category.

A brief overview of the existing literature on this novel topic has been limited due to its failure to engage with the impact of religious factors on Iran's strategic relations with China. Much of this literature has been predicated on the assumption that the Islamic Republic of Iran evaluates all countries, particularly the US, through the same prism. From this perspective, the present paper argues that the Islamic Republic has managed to craft a strategic relationship with the People's Republic of China while its ideological and religious discourse facilitates a close cooperation between an Islamist state and a communist one.

۳. چارچوب اساسی سیاست خارجی

The foreign policy of any nation rests upon two fundamental pillars, each contributing to the overarching framework guiding its external relations. These pillars are: a) the foundational pillar, which establishes the core objectives and principles shaping the country's engagement with the international community. This pillar draws upon the foundational values embedded within the nation's political system, often stemming from ideology and enshrined within constitutional provisions. b) The adaptive pillar, which encompasses the methodologies and strategies employed to actualize the primary objectives within the broader framework of the political system. This adaptive approach allows for flexibility and maneuverability, enabling the nation to respond effectively to evolving circumstances and exigencies.

Religious elements are a cornerstone of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. These elements not only shape Iran's interactions within the Middle East but also influence global perceptions and reactions to its policies. The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy is significantly influenced by religious elements rooted in a revolutionary narrative of Shia Islam. These religious factors shape Iran's interactions with other countries, particularly within the Middle East. The overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic marked a turning point where religious ideology became a central element of Iran's domestic and foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The constitutional framework of the Islamic Republic embeds the principles of Shia Islam, mandating the promotion of Islamic unity and support for oppressed peoples worldwide. There are key religious elements in Iran's foreign policy. The most important one is Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist). Central to Iran's political system, this doctrine grants significant power to the Supreme Leader, influencing both domestic and foreign policies. It underscores the exportation of Iran's revolutionary ideals, encouraging support for Shia groups and movements across the region. Iran's constitutional framework also refers to the promotion of Shia Islam. Iran's foreign policy often includes support for Shia communities and militias in countries like Iraq, Lebanon (Hezbollah), and Yemen (Houthis). This support is seen as both a religious duty and a strategic move to expand Iran's influence in the region. Last but not least, the current constitution supports anti-Western sentiment. Rooted in the revolution's ideology, there is a strong anti-Western (particularly anti-American) sentiment driving Iran's foreign policy. This includes

opposition to Western presence in the Middle East and resistance against perceived imperialism. While religious solidarity provides a basis for soft power, Iran's involvement often includes significant military aid, complicating its hard power, image, and relations. In summary, understanding the religious motivations behind Iran's foreign engagements is crucial for comprehending the broader dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran serves as the cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy, providing explicit principles that blend resilience with adaptability. Articulated within the Constitution is a clear mandate emphasizing the rejection of any form of domination and submission, the preservation of comprehensive independence and territorial integrity, advocacy for the rights of Muslims worldwide, non-alignment with hegemonic powers, and the cultivation of peaceful relations with non-belligerent nations. (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, ۲۰۰۱: ۱۵۲) The Constitution, which encompasses both ideological steadfastness and pragmatic flexibility. The ideological dimension underscores a commitment to religious principlism, emphasizing unwavering adherence to core beliefs and principles. Simultaneously, the pragmatic dimension recognizes the necessity of adaptability in navigating the complex landscape of global affairs, acknowledging the need to balance principles with the realities of international diplomacy. This dual approach enables Iran to maintain a coherent and principled stance in its foreign relations while also effectively responding to dynamic geopolitical challenges. By combining ideological conviction with strategic pragmatism, Iran can pursue its interests on the world stage while remaining true to its core values and principles.

۳-۱. چارچوب فقهی سیاست خارجی

Irrespective of geopolitical complexities and transient political exigencies, Islamic ideology has emerged as a pivotal determinant shaping the principles and methodologies underpinning the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This conspicuous reality underscores the prominence of what can be termed 'religious principlism' - an approach characterized by the referencing and justification of foreign policy actions through Islamic doctrines. Consequently, the decision-making processes in Iran's foreign policy domain are intricately interwoven with the framework of "religious principles and jurisprudential rules." This distinctive feature renders Iran's foreign policy incompletely explicable

through conventional theories of mainstream international relations, such as neorealism and neoliberalism. These rationalist paradigms, grounded in assumptions of rational choice, typically perceive the Islamic State of Iran as a self-interested political entity driven solely by the calculus of maximizing material gains. Contrary to this reductionist perspective, an examination through the lens of constructivist theory reveals that the national outlook in Iran's foreign policy is profoundly shaped by the normative framework articulated within the social and semantic milieu of the Islamic Revolution's discourse. Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2007: 109-110 (This paradigmatic shift imbues Iran's foreign policy with a unique trajectory, endowing policymakers and implementers with distinct opportunities and challenges in their engagements with other nations and within the international arena. The normative system established by the Islamic Revolution not only informs the ideological underpinnings of Iran's foreign policy but also imbues it with a sense of moral imperative and ethical obligation in its interactions with the global community.

۳-۲. چگونگی تعامل با نظام بین‌المللی

The adherence to religious principles within the framework of Islamic doctrine does not imply rigidity in foreign policy. Indeed, the rich tapestry of Islamic teachings encompasses principles and rules that not only facilitate collaboration with non-Islamic entities but also advocate for pragmatic flexibility in dealings with adversarial nations. The nuanced interplay between "customs and contingent circumstances" holds paramount importance in elucidating this aspect of the religious worldview governing an Islamic state.

Furthermore, the concurrent imperative of religious-political allegiance, encapsulated in the "priority of preserving the system," furnishes a foundational basis for reconciling potential discordance between national interests and Islamic values. In this context, the "Theory of Umm al-Qura," as espoused within the discourse of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, asserts that the preservation of Iran's unity, security, and prosperity - positioned as the epicenter of the Islamic world - takes precedence over formal religious commitments. It is incumbent upon Iran to exemplify a model of Islamic governance, thereby conferring legitimacy to pragmatic pursuits aimed at safeguarding the nation's security and fostering its economic development (Larijani, 1990).

The amalgamation of religious principlism and pragmatism engenders a distinct framework within which the Islamic Republic justifies its foreign policy endeavors. Contrary to prevalent stereotypes regarding the purported dichotomy between Islamic ideology and political flexibility, religious injunctions constitute the cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy, encompassing both elements of steadfastness and adaptability. As Ramazani asserts, Iran has harbored a spectrum of idealists and revolutionary pragmatists since the inception of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Consequently, the nature of Iran's foreign policy transcends linear or dialectical paradigms, instead embracing a multifaceted and dynamic approach (Ramazani, 1995).

۴. تأثیر عمیق اندیشه اسلامی بر چارچوب سیاست خارجی جمهوری اسلامی ایران

The profound influence of Islamic ideology within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly shaped the principles and mechanisms guiding its foreign policy. This influence is particularly evident in a dichotomy of religious directives, which can be categorized as 'non-flexible' and 'flexible.'

۴-۱. اصول-دستورالعملی غیر-انعطاف‌پذیر در سیاست خارجی

Among the core religious directives that impart a degree of rigidity to Iran's foreign policy are:

- **The principle of Nafy-e Sabil (rejection of non-Muslim domination):** This principle firmly opposes subjugation by non-Muslim powers, emphasizing the necessity of preserving the dignity and faith of Muslims. It prohibits Iran from engaging in relationships or agreements that could entail political, economic, or cultural subordination to non-Muslim entities. As Ayatollah Khomeini notes regarding Quranic verse 141 of Surah An-Nisa, "Our Islamic logic dictates that...submission to the authority of others is impermissible" (Khomeini, 2010, p. 91).
- **Tawalla and Tabarra:** Rooted in Surah Mumtahnah (verses 1-۷), تَوَلَّاء و تَبَارَّاء (loyalty and dissociation) are two interconnected principles that guide Iran's foreign policy. Tawalla obliges Muslims to maintain close relations with fellow Muslims while maintaining distance from non-Muslims. It obliges the Islamic government to prioritize the interests of Muslims in its international engagements and limits alliances with non-Muslims, as genuine religious friendship requires alignment with fellow believers (Akhavan Kazemi, ۲۰۱۳).
- **The principle of invitation:** This principle reflects the divine

mandate for Islamic states to propagate Islam and expand its adherents, as decreed upon the Prophet (Surah Nahl, verse 125). It underscores the obligation of Islamic states to shape foreign policy actions that fulfill this universalistic religious duty (Sajjadi, 2009).

- **The principle of defending the lands and interests of Muslims (and other oppressed peoples) worldwide:** This directive emphasizes the responsibility of a Muslim state to defend Muslims globally, as well as other oppressed communities, due to the interconnectedness of their plight with the integrity of Islam. It mandates proactive support for the oppressed while refraining from interference in the internal affairs of other nations (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2001, Article 154).
- **The principle of Jihad:** Rooted in the obligation to protect and propagate Islam, this principle permits the use of military means by Muslim governments (Firahi, 2008). When antagonistic interpretations of Islamic–non-Islamic relations dominate, they may prioritize a non-peaceful conception of Jihad as a central signifier in foreign relations. Such interpretations risk undermining potential cooperation with non-Islamic countries.

۴-۲. چگونگی تطبیق این اصول با شرایط ایران

Conversely, flexible religious instructions, which provide adaptability to Iran's foreign policy, include:

- **The principle of peaceful coexistence:** Grounded in the recognition of the shared humanity of all individuals as creations of God, this principle regards war as an aberration and advocates the use of peaceful methods to achieve objectives. In foreign policy, this entails fostering cooperation and engagement to attract others and, ultimately, to propagate Islam (Haghighat, ۲۰۰۸). در این زمینه، معاصران علمای شیعه به طور کلی جهاد را به عنوان یک روش مشروع برای دفاع از اسلام و امت اسلامی، نه به عنوان ابزاری برای گسترش، می‌دانند (فراهی، ۱۳۸۷).
- **The principle of keeping the promise:** Fulfilling commitments made through agreements is considered a religious obligation unless there is evidence that the other party intends to violate the terms. This principle, supported by the actions of the Prophet and Shia Imams, underscores the importance of honoring international agreements (Sajjadi, 2009).
- **The rule of expediency:** Emphasizing the protection of

fundamental human interests - such as religion, life, progeny, intellect, and property - this principle holds that actions detrimental to these interests contravene expediency and, by extension, religious law (Eftekhari, 2020: 39). It encompasses several jurisprudential rules, including the prioritization of more critical interests over less critical ones, the permissibility of minor transgressions to prevent greater harm, and exemptions from certain Sharia obligations in emergencies (Akhavan Kazemi, 2013).

۵. چارچوب نظری پژوهش: رویکرد سازشگرانه در روابط بین‌الملل

As constructivist scholars have emphasized, the behavior of states in the international arena is profoundly shaped by a complex matrix of norms - both domestic and international - that are internalized over time. These norms constitute the foundation upon which states construct their identities and define their interactions with other actors in the intricate landscape of international relations (Wendt, ۱۹۹۹). در این پژوهش، تأثیر آموزه‌های اسلامی بر تصمیم‌گیری‌های سیاست خارجی ایران مورد بررسی قرار می‌گیرد. تأثیر این آموزه‌ها بر رویکرد ایران به سایر کشورها در طول زمان، به ویژه در مواجهه با تحولات منطقه‌ای و جهانی، مورد مطالعه قرار می‌گیرد. این رویکرد سازشگرانه، بر این باور استوار است که اسلام به عنوان یک دین جامع، چارچوبی برای رفتار بین‌المللی ارائه می‌دهد که همواره با تغییرات شرایط سازگار است. در این راستا، تأثیر آموزه‌های اسلامی بر سیاست خارجی ایران، به ویژه در مواجهه با تحولات منطقه‌ای و جهانی، مورد بررسی قرار می‌گیرد. این رویکرد سازشگرانه، بر این باور استوار است که اسلام به عنوان یک دین جامع، چارچوبی برای رفتار بین‌المللی ارائه می‌دهد که همواره با تغییرات شرایط سازگار است.

Conversely, when a state is not perceived to possess such characteristics, Iran demonstrates a readiness for cooperative engagement, even in contexts where certain inflexible principles exist. This selective approach highlights the dynamic interplay between Islamic doctrine and geopolitical considerations in shaping Iran's foreign policy. It reflects a deliberate strategic calculus aimed at navigating the complexities of international relations while maintaining alignment with core principles of national sovereignty and Islamic teachings. Ultimately, this underscores Iran's pragmatic orientation in foreign affairs, wherein the imperatives of Islamic doctrine are carefully harmonized with the exigencies of realpolitik on the global stage.

۵-۱. چارچوب نظری پژوهش: رویکرد سازشگرانه در روابط بین‌الملل

Countries

This rationale clarifies the Islamic Republic's stance toward hostile or unfriendly states, particularly those from the Western bloc.

Within Iran's foreign policy doctrine, these states are evaluated through multiple lenses, including historical colonialism toward Iran, imperialist expansionist tendencies, and contemporary manifestations of hostility. Foremost among them are the Western powers, with the United States receiving the greatest scrutiny. Iran's approach to the United States exemplifies how Islamic principles shape a nation's foreign policy. Engagements with the U.S. - including negotiations - are approached with suspicion, as prevailing discourse frames such interactions as potentially resulting in political, economic, and cultural subjugation to American and Western influence.

Over time, however, particularly since the Iran-Iraq War - during which Iran maintained significant trade ties with the West, exemplified by the Iran-Contra affair and the subsequent acceptance of a ceasefire - a discernible shift in Iran's foreign policy emerged (Ramazani, 1995). This shift, most evident during the tenures of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Hassan Rouhani, introduced pragmatic elements alongside enduring idealism. The exigencies of war, coupled with geopolitical upheavals following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic imperatives of post-war reconstruction, fostered a more pragmatic outlook. Consultations between senior officials, scholars, and diplomats trained within the Islamic Republic further reinforced this recalibration (Moshirzadeh, 2017, p. 216).

Subsequently, Iran pursued indirect cooperation with the United States and Western powers during the crises in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, direct negotiations with the United States over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) highlighted Iran's departure from common stereotypes regarding a perceived incompatibility between Islamic ideology and political flexibility. In this context, the jurisprudential principle of expediency (*maslahat*) becomes particularly salient. Notably, during the JCPOA negotiations, Iran's leadership employed the concept of “heroic leniency”, interpreted as a mandate for the government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to engage with world powers, led by the United States, exemplifying Iran's pragmatic approach in balancing ideological commitments with strategic imperatives.

۵-۲. **معمولاً در سیاست خارجی ایران، این کشورها را از طریق عدسهای گوناگون، از جمله استعمار تاریخی علیه ایران، تمایلات توسعه‌طلبانه امپریالیستی، و مظاهر معاصر خصومت ارزیابی می‌شود. در میان اینها، قدرتمندترین غربی است که بیشترین زیر و رو را می‌بیند. رویکرد ایران به ایالات متحده، نشانگر این است که اصول اسلامی چگونه می‌تواند در تعیین سیاست خارجی یک کشور نقش داشته باشد. تعاملات با ایالات متحده - از جمله مذاکرات - با شک و تردید همراه است، زیرا چارچوب مسلط اینگونه تعاملات را به عنوان نتیجه‌ای بالقوه منجر به تسلیم سیاسی، اقتصادی و فرهنگی ایران در برابر آمریکا و غرب می‌داند.**

Conversely, this rationale clarifies the Islamic Republic's approach toward friendly or non-hostile states, particularly those outside the Western sphere. The dynamics governing relations with these

countries - often non-Western - differ substantially, as the stringent principles that shape Iran's broader foreign policy do not constrain cooperation. Notably, establishing relations with such states does not trigger concerns regarding potential political, economic, or cultural domination within Iran's prevailing political discourse.

Within the framework of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy doctrine, these states are assessed according to several indicators, including the absence of colonial history toward Iran, a lack of imperialist expansionism, and alignment with regional and global initiatives favorable to Iran. Prominent examples include non-Western powers such as Russia and China. Iran's stance toward Russia, for instance, exemplifies the significance of strategic alignment in regional politics. Despite Russia's historical presence in Iran and the Soviet Union's past expansionist ambitions, contemporary Russia is regarded as a strategic partner. This perception is rooted in Russia's alignment with Iran on key positions vis-à-vis the United States and the West, reflecting the interests and ideals of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, there is an optimistic expectation that, if successful in shaping a new regional or international order, Russia could serve as a proactive ally, providing a protective strategic umbrella for Iran.

۶. چگونگی استفاده از ظرفیت‌های منطقه‌ای و بین‌المللی برای تقویت جایگاه ایران در منطقه و جهان

China's strategy of peacefully expanding its global influence is not merely perceived as a threat by the Iranian government; rather, Tehran views it as a strategic opportunity in its ongoing opposition to the United States and its regional allies. Iran has shown a strong interest in strengthening ties with China, most notably through its recent adoption of a "Look East" policy. Importantly, Iran's pursuit of closer relations with China aligns closely with the ideological and religious doctrines that shape the Islamic Republic's foreign policy framework.

Iran's approach to China provides a compelling illustration of the argument that the ostensibly rigid religious principles underpinning its foreign policy do not necessarily preclude cooperation with non-Muslim states. Instead, Iran navigates potential tensions by invoking flexible jurisprudential rules, such as the principle of expediency (*maslahat*). This strategic maneuvering highlights Iran's pragmatic capacity to reconcile ideological imperatives with geopolitical realities, facilitating constructive engagement with China while safeguarding its core national and religious interests.

9-1. 聖書の原則を「硬化の原則」として、

‘Hardening Principles’

China serves as a compelling illustration of how Iran's ostensibly rigid foreign policy principles do not necessarily impede cooperation. From the perspective of religious principlism, the strengthening of ties with China does not contravene the foundational tenets of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, particularly the principle of rejecting non-Muslim domination. Within Iran's official and prevailing religious discourse, engagement with China is not perceived as posing a risk of subjecting Muslims to non-Muslim control. In other words, according to prevailing interpretations in Iran, China's expansion of influence does not constitute the type of imperialist expansionism that would entail domination over a Muslim nation. Consequently, Iran regards cooperation with China as consistent with its national interests and aligned with its ideological and religious principles.

This perception largely stems from China's lack of a colonial history or military interventions in Iran and other developing nations. China's absence of a colonial background serves as a source of soft power, enhancing the favorable perception of its global influence, particularly among countries like Iran (Shariatinia, 2012). Unlike Western powers with colonial legacies, China's historical non-imperialist stance reinforces its appeal as a partner, aligning with principles of mutual respect and non-interference championed by states seeking to assert their sovereignty (Hillman, 2020).

Additionally, China's foreign policy, characterized by non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, resonates with the aspirations of countries like Iran. Unlike colonial powers, China's engagement is perceived as mutually beneficial and respectful of each nation's independence and territorial integrity (Rolland, 2017). This approach fosters trust and confidence in China as a reliable partner for economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and strategic collaboration. In the context of Iran's foreign policy, the absence of historical animosity or power struggles provides a conducive environment for bilateral relations to flourish. Iran regards China as a valuable ally with whom it can pursue shared objectives, including economic growth, regional stability, and multilateral cooperation (Mendes, 2018). China's positive role in global affairs further reinforces Iran's strategic alignment with Beijing, highlighting Tehran's pragmatic approach in navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. In summary, China's lack of a

colonial background constitutes a cornerstone of its soft power, fostering goodwill and cooperation with countries like Iran, and strengthening bilateral relations to promote regional stability and prosperity (McKenzie, 2018).

Furthermore, Iranian authorities implicitly trust that China's intentions in expanding its relationship do not include exerting cultural influence. Unlike Western powers, which often engage in normative or ideological projection aimed at infiltrating cultural structures and civil society, China's engagement is not perceived as pursuing such objectives (Mações, 2019). Consequently, Iranian officials do not view China as attempting to induce political change through soft subversion. China's emphasis on non-interference and respect for sovereignty contrasts sharply with the interventionist tendencies attributed to Western states (Yiwei, 2016). Its focus on mutually beneficial cooperation and economic development aligns with Iran's objectives, particularly regarding stability and prosperity.

Finally, China's investments and infrastructure projects in Iran are primarily driven by economic rather than ideological or cultural motives. This pragmatic orientation reassures Iranian policymakers that China's involvement aims at mutual economic growth and technological advancement, rather than imposing a particular normative or cultural framework. The absence of perceived cultural hegemony mitigates concerns of soft subversion, distinguishing China from Western powers and contributing to its perception as a reliable partner for cooperation and development in the eyes of Iranian authorities (Mahbubani, 2020).

۶-۲. «مبانی اصولی و مفاهیم اساسی» در «اصول انعطاف‌پذیر» **‘Flexible Principles’**

From the perspective of flexible religious principles, Iran's relationship with China is supported by clear religious justifications. For example, the principle of peaceful coexistence, which advocates engagement in the international arena and the promotion of cooperation, can be invoked. Considering China's status as a key global partner for Iran, coupled with its Eastern cultural affinity, it exemplifies a non-Muslim nation aligned with the ethos of peaceful coexistence. Moreover, maintaining robust relations with China - underscored by agreements such as the recently signed 25-year cooperation contract - aligns with the religious principle of keeping the promise. Simultaneously, Iran's approach to China demonstrates the influence of religious pragmatism on the foreign policy of an

Islamic state. In this regard, the concept of customs and contingent circumstances is significant in understanding how Iran reconciles its religious worldview with practical foreign policy considerations. It is important to note that this interpretation is based on an introspective analysis of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, without negating external realist or pragmatic perspectives.

According to the jurisprudential rule of expediency (*maslahat*), the Islamic state is not only permitted but also compelled to temporarily set aside certain interests to safeguard the fundamental interests of society. Consequently, when Chinese policies - such as those concerning the treatment of Chinese Muslims - appear to contradict Iran's foreign policy principles, particularly the defense of Muslims worldwide, Iran may choose strategic silence. This silence is justified by the belief that the potential harm arising from strained relations with China outweighs the benefits of immediate public criticism.

Within this framework, the Islamic Republic consistently seeks to avoid positions that could jeopardize relations with China, as the principle of preserving the Islamic system supersedes other binding foreign policy principles. To safeguard its economic interests and secure China's political support - or at least its neutrality - in conflicts with Western powers, Iran deems it imperative to maintain cooperative relations with China. This strategic imperative persists even when certain Chinese domestic or foreign policies conflict with some Islamic principles guiding Iran's foreign policy or its national sovereignty. In essence, preserving the integrity of the Islamic state remains the overarching objective within the jurisprudential discourse, thereby necessitating sustained cooperation with China.

۶-۳. □□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□ □□□□□□□□

The analysis presented here moves beyond theoretical speculation, grounding itself in the practical realities of Iranian politics through concrete examples. These cases not only substantiate the research hypothesis but also highlight the nuanced interplay between ideology and realpolitik in Iran's foreign relations.

- **Iranian Official Discourse and Media Analysis:** The recent landmark 25-year cooperation agreement between Iran and China, coupled with the appointment of a dedicated Iranian representative to oversee its implementation, demonstrates a firm commitment to the pact, irrespective of changes in executive leadership. Speeches by select officials and conservative Members of Parliament, advocating robust support for the

agreement, further illustrate Iran's determination to strengthen ties with China. Conservative media outlets such as Kayhan reinforce this perspective by emphasizing China's non-colonial approach toward Iran, thereby providing additional validation of Tehran's strategic alignment with Beijing.

- **Practical Policy Approaches in Relation to China's Domestic and International Affairs:** Iran's deliberate silence regarding China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims - despite potential tension with its foreign policy principle of defending Muslims worldwide - reflects a pragmatic strategy designed to preserve diplomatic relations with Beijing. Similarly, Iran's continued engagement with China, even in the context of UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran, underscores Tehran's strategic imperative to navigate geopolitical complexities while safeguarding national interests. Furthermore, Iran's cautious stance concerning the endorsement by Arab leaders of the UAE's claim to three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf illustrates the delicate balancing act Tehran performs to maintain regional stability while sustaining its partnership with China.

In summary, the empirical evidence presented here illuminates the multifaceted nature of Iran-China relations, demonstrating the intricate interplay between ideological imperatives and pragmatic considerations within Iran's foreign policy framework. These examples underscore the resilience, adaptability, and strategic calculation inherent in Iran's diplomatic practices as it navigates the complexities of the international arena.

Conclusion

In April 1971, against the backdrop of the groundbreaking “ping pong diplomacy” between the United States and China, Ashraf Pahlavi, the Shah's twin sister, undertook a historic meeting with Zhou Enlai, the Premier of the People's Republic of China. This encounter marked the beginning of a new era in the historical relations between these two civilizations. Concurrently, the Shah engaged in strategic discussions with Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in Moscow, as part of Iran's broader efforts to recalibrate its policy toward the East during the emerging era of Détente. These diplomatic initiatives were informed by insights from American officials in late ۱۹۶۸, who had indicated that the United States was planning to engage Beijing, thereby encouraging Iran to adopt a similar orientation. Consequently, Iran and China formally established

diplomatic relations on August 16, 1971, further solidifying their burgeoning bilateral relationship.

Nearly half a century later, on March 27, 2021, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's former Foreign Minister, and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, signed a landmark 25-year cooperation agreement. This pact firmly positioned China as Iran's foremost commercial partner amidst the constraints imposed by US sanctions. Described by Zarif as "a friend during difficult times," China pledged to enhance investment in Iran's energy sector and transport infrastructure. The agreement promises to secure China's uninterrupted access to the Persian Gulf's vast oil and gas reserves while providing Iran with critical financial resources to sustain foreign investment amid the debilitating effects of US-led sanctions. Simultaneously, it expands Chinese influence in the West Asian region, reinforcing a strategic partnership between the two countries.

This paper seeks to bridge existing gaps in the literature on Iran-China relations by providing a cohesive explanation of how two seemingly disparate ideological systems - a Marxist regime and an Islamist state - have forged a resilient partnership. It emphasizes the role of specific ideological principles and pragmatic considerations in overcoming apparent incompatibilities that might otherwise hinder cooperation. Moreover, the analysis underscores how the religious principles embedded in Iran's foreign policy discourse not only permit engagement with China but also actively justify and reinforce this relationship.

However, it is crucial to note that while Islamic teachings facilitate a cooperative foreign policy toward China, they do not necessarily extend the same leniency toward Western powers. Unlike China - which is viewed favorably due to its lack of colonial history and military intervention in Iran - Western countries often encounter the more rigid application of Islamic principles in Iran's foreign policy calculus. This distinction highlights the importance of factors such as colonial history, imperial influence, and alignment with Iran's current strategic interests in determining friend and foe within Iranian foreign policy discourse.

In essence, China exemplifies a case in which the ostensibly rigid principles of Iran's foreign policy do not hinder cooperation. The absence of perceived threats of non-Muslim domination, combined with opportunities for economic collaboration and cultural affinity, positions China as a viable and reliable partner for Iran. Furthermore, the relationship is reinforced by flexible religious principles, such as peaceful coexistence and the obligation to honor

agreements, which provide additional religious justification for the partnership. Ultimately, religious pragmatism, guided by the principle of expediency, underpins Iran's strategic orientation toward China, enabling Tehran to safeguard its economic interests and secure political support amid the geopolitical challenges posed by Western powers.

Acknowledgement:

This article received financial support from Grant No. CRF HKU C7052-18G, provided by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the international conference Global China in a Religious World (HKIHSS, The University of Hong Kong, 17–18 August 2023).

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