



## ■ Mervat Zakaria

*a researcher in Iranian studies,  
PhD student at the Faculty of Economics  
and Political Science - Cairo University*



# *The Impact of the Development of Chinese-Iranian Relations on the Arab Region*

## **Introduction:**

*The visit of Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in mid-February 2023 has raised many questions about the development of relations between Tehran and Beijing since the beginning of his presidency in August 2021, especially since his government has adopted a relatively biased approach towards both Russia and China. This came after the failure of the previous Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's government to return to the nuclear agreement with the (4+1) group, in addition to the United States, and the emergence of a political trend within Iran that stresses on the necessity of enhancing relations with the East to improve the situation in Iran on all levels.*

As a result of the evolving relations between Beijing and Tehran in the political, military-security, and economic fields, significant impacts have been observed on the Arab region. This is due to the involvement of both Iran and China in this region and the strong relations that bind the Arab states to these two countries.

Considering the potential repercussions on the Arab countries due to the growing relations between Tehran and Beijing, some proposals can be suggested to mitigate these negative results and enhance their positive counterparts.

## **Study Objectives:**

1. Identification the most prominent features of the development of Iranian-Chinese relations.

2. Presenting the most important repercussions of the development of relations between Iran and China on the Arab region.
3. Proposing a set of solutions to mitigate the negative impacts, which were resulted from the development of relations on the Arab region.

## **Study Questions:**

The research problem of the study revolves around the impact of the development of Chinese-Iranian relations on the situation in the Arab region. This can be followed by some sub-questions, such as:

1. *What are the most prominent fields of development of Chinese-Iranian relations?*

**2. What are the most prominent features of the impact of the development of Chinese-Iranian relations on the Arab region?**

**3. How can we mitigate some of the negative repercussions imposed by the development of Iranian-Chinese relations on the Arab region?**

***Study timeframe:***

The study timeframe begins in 2021; when the current Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, assumed office, and adopted a strategy based on openness to neighboring countries as well as the countries of the Eastern axis, represented by China and Russia, especially after the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018 until now.

***The Theoretical Framework of the Study:***

The theoretical framework of the study is based on theory of neorealism, especially the aspect that the American political scientist Stephen Walt spoke about regarding the advantages that regional and small countries can obtain due to their alliance and solidarity with the major powers, which applies to the growing relations between China and Iran at all levels. In this context, Walt reveals that small countries solidarity with major powers to balance the threat they may be exposed from another major power, and this would expand the margin of movement and maneuver available to this small country in light of the international system that is characterized by chaos <sup>(1)</sup>.

Based on the principle of chaos and the absence of a higher authority capable of regulating interactions between countries, alliances are a good means in this context, because each country has no choice but to place its interests above the interests of all other countries. Moreover, the essence of the security dilemma according to neo-realism becomes evident in most of the steps taken by

some major powers to achieve their security deduct from the balance of power held by other powers, because power in international relations is relative and not absolute <sup>(2)</sup>.

In the context of applying this idea to the case under study, we find that Iran has used strategic cooperation with China as a tool to overcome the economic sanctions imposed on it by the United States of America, which has achieved dual interests for both Beijing and Tehran. This led to strengthening China's ability to compete with the American presence in the region, and with regard to Tehran, this led to the development of its relationship with the Arab countries, the most prominent indicators of which became clear in the mediation role played by China in favor of resuming diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh, which had been cut off since 2016.

***This study will be presented through the following elements:***

- 1- The most prominent features of the development of Iranian-Chinese relations.
- 2- The impact of the development of Chinese-Iranian relations on the Arab region.
- 3- Proposals to confront some of the negative repercussions resulting from the development of Chinese-Iranian relations on the Arab region.

***First: The most prominent features of the development of Iranian-Chinese relations:***

***1. Political Relations:***

***Iran's desire to develop its political relationship with Beijing stems from several goals and features, which can be clarified as follows:***

***A. Emergence of a supportive trend to enhance relations in Iran:*** The thirteenth government led by Ibrahim Raisi - affiliated with the hardline faction in Iran - has shown



a great desire to improve relations with China since coming to power in August 2021, considering China as the most important global strategic partner for Iran. Although Chinese President Xi Jinping did not visit Iran during his visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, he extended an invitation to Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi to visit China in mid-February 2023, which indicates the pivotal position of Tehran for Beijing in this context<sup>(3)</sup>.

This coincided with the stumbling of negotiations to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and the (4+1) group and the United States indirectly, which strengthened the voices supporting the shift towards the East, especially regarding Russia and China, moreover, hardliners in Iran announced that they would not allow any internal conflict to undermine this mission, on the background of their desire to secure Iran's economic and strategic interests<sup>(4)</sup>.

**B. Confronting Washington:** Despite the dissatisfaction expressed by some Iranian politicians regarding the focus of Raisi's government's foreign policy on the East, and the belief that it will lead to the loss of Iran's natural and proper balance between the East and the West, however, there is still a broad spectrum in Iran that stresses on the necessity of utilizing relations with China as a pressure card against the United States and its Western allies<sup>(5)</sup>.

This comes in the context of Iran's efforts to strengthen relations with Moscow as well, amid the Western-Russian tensions due to the Russian military operation in Ukraine. Some assessments indicated that Iran is moving towards establishing a kind of alliance with both Moscow and Beijing to counter diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions from the West<sup>(6)</sup>.

### **C. Joint Coordination in the Middle East:**

Some assessments have confirmed that while relations between Iran and China are

growing, the Gulf Arab states are trying to develop their relations with both parties. This is most evident in the return of the Emirati and Kuwaiti ambassadors to Tehran and the resumption of Iranian-Saudi relations with Chinese mediation, which culminated in an agreement signed on March 10, 2023 in Beijing. In parallel with the return of Iran's regional ally, Syria, to the Arab League and the attendance of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the 32nd summit in Jeddah on May 19 of the current year.

Here, it can be said that Chinese engagement has contributed to ensuring the stability of the Middle East, as it is one of the most important regions exporting oil necessary for the continued economic growth of China. This is met with a similar desire from both Iran and the Gulf states, but with different goals.

While Iran seeks China's engagement in the region to increase competition with the already declining US influence, on the background of given Washington's opposition to the growing Iranian influence in the Arab states through its affiliated militias, which US authorities accuse of destabilizing the region, the Gulf Arab states aim to strengthen their relations with Beijing to fill the void created by the withdrawal of US forces from some regional countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and to contain the growing Iranian influence in this context<sup>(7)</sup>.

### **2. Military and Security Relations:**

*Iran needs China and vice versa militarily and security-wise, based on a set of determinants, the most prominent of which are:*

#### **A- Strengthening Stability in West Asia:**

Iran believes that given that Asia is the center of emerging global changes, maintaining and promoting peace in this vast region is not only an option but also a necessity. On the other hand, Tehran fears that any kind of tension with China in this region could occur as a result of

Iran's efforts to strengthen its influence in a number of regional countries, while the latter is very important for Beijing due to its desire to strengthen its strategic interests in this region, which some political currents in Iran have called for acting rationally to avoid such tensions with China<sup>(8)</sup>.

For China, sensitivities related to energy transport security and the need to provide security for infrastructure projects and freight transport under the *(One Belt and One Road)* initiative have increased military security cooperation with West Asian governments, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In light of the decline of the American role in the region, Beijing saw a good opportunity to strengthen its role, in addition to increasing the rate of investments with these countries, especially with regard to the arms trade, which would make the balance of power tilt in favor of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in the face of Iran<sup>(9)</sup>.

### ***B- Arms Sales:***

A review of relations between Beijing and Tehran shows that the latter has been one of the largest importers of arms from China, especially during the Iran-Iraq war. In this context, one study reveals that from 1982 to 2004, China supplied Iran with \$3.8 billion worth of conventional weapons, including artillery equipment and heavy tanks. On the other hand, Iran supplied China with Soviet-made weapons that it had confiscated from Iraq during the war, as well as some advanced American-made aircraft (*including the Phantom F-4*) that were supplied to Iran during the Shah's rule<sup>(10)</sup>.

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that after 2006, China supplied Iran with anti-ship missiles, portable surface-to-air missiles, armored personnel carriers, surface-to-air missile systems, air search radars, and

Catamaran missile boats, the military systems, that have long enabled Iran to control the Strait of Hormuz. In March 2010, Iran began manufacturing the Chinese-designed Nasr 1 anti-ship missile. Just four years earlier, during the 2006 Lebanon War, four Israeli Navy soldiers were killed by an Iranian missile derived from the Chinese subsonic anti-ship cruise missile (C-802) fired by Iran's Lebanese proxy, represented by Hezbollah.

**However**, there have been no reports of Iranian efforts to get Chinese weapons since the lifting of the international sanctions imposed on Iran in 2020 regarding the purchase of weapons, perhaps due to Tehran's economic problems and the potential backlash from Iran's adversaries, but the Iranian defense industry continues to show interest in Chinese weapons, especially fighter jets<sup>(11)</sup>.

### ***C- Iranian Pursuit of Chinese Military Technology:***

Chinese military technology holds great importance to Iran, especially regarding drones or what is known as dual-use technology. In addition, some military reports have revealed that China has granted both Iran and Pakistan access to the (BeiDou) satellite navigation system for military purposes. Although Iranian's current ballistic missiles rely on guidance mechanisms rather than satellites, BeiDou can assist the Iranian armed forces in determining launch sites and target locations. among other tactical benefits, especially with support from Chinese intelligence.

Chinese companies have also supplied the Iranian Centrifuge Technology Company with aluminum products used in the manufacture of centrifuges, and technology transfers related to missiles and Iran's nuclear program are expected to expand further after the expiration of Resolution 2231 which was restrictions on Iranian exports and imports of missile-related equipment and gear under the Missile





Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) purchases on October 18, 2023 and 2025, respectively <sup>(12)</sup>.

### **3. Economic Relations:**

*The most prominent features of the development of relations between Iran and China on the economic side are evident through a set of dimensions, including:*

#### **A- Agreements following the visit of Raisi to Beijing:**

During Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing, the Iranian and Chinese presidents signed 20 economic and security agreements in various fields, the most prominent of which are trade, transportation, information technology, tourism, agriculture, and crisis response. The agreements are worth billions of dollars. Some analysts have revealed that China is expected to invest in Iranian economic projects, such as establishing a high-speed rail system linking Tehran and Mashhad and developing Imam Khomeini Airport <sup>(13)</sup>.

However, some Chinese assessments have indicated that economic relations between Tehran and Beijing could develop further if Western economic sanctions on Iran are lifted, especially as Iran's geographical location, hydrocarbon resources, and communications infrastructure create good conditions for Chinese investments.

These Chinese sources acknowledged that in order for Iran to get the most out of the 25-year agreement between Tehran and Beijing, Raisi's government must adopt a conciliatory foreign policy with its neighbors and the world and provide the necessary conditions for the presence of all foreign companies in Iran. At that time, China will persuade to use all available tools to increase its presence and influence in the region in general, especially in Iran <sup>(14)</sup>.

#### **B- Promoting trade exchange:**

A report by the Iranian Statistical Center, released in conjunction with Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023, stated that China is Tehran's top trading partner, having invested about \$162 million in the first year of Raisi's presidency in Iran. According to data recorded by Iranian customs for the first ten months of the last Iranian calendar year, which ended in March 2023, Tehran's exports to Beijing amounted to \$12.6 billion, while it imported \$12.7 billion worth of goods from China.

Despite Western sanctions on Iran, China is the largest importer of Iranian oil, at a rate of one million barrels per day, in exchange for a discount of at least 25%. According to the Chinese Customs Administration, total non-oil trade with Iran reached \$15.8 billion in 2022, an increase of 7% from 2021. China bought goods, including building materials, metals, and food, worth \$6.5 billion from Iran in 2022, and the Islamic Republic of Iran bought goods, including cars and industrial machinery, worth \$8.3 billion during the same year <sup>(15)</sup>.

#### **C- Bypassing sanctions:**

Iran's desire to strengthen its relationship with some Eastern powers, such as Russia and China, stems from the ability of these two countries to help it bypass the sanctions imposed on it by Western powers. The US sanctions on oil exports have caused many problems for the Iranian rentier economy, which relies on a large part of its income from this industry. However, Iran has managed to maintain a reasonable share of its oil exports by exporting through the gray market to China and some other Asian countries.

This led to supporting the Iranian economy at a time when Iran is suffering from a severe economic crisis, with inflation exceeding 60% and unemployment exceeding 12%, leading to

rising prices of essential commodities and an increase in the number of Iranians living below the poverty line <sup>(16)</sup>.

***D- The comprehensive strategic agreement between the two countries:***

Although this agreement was announced to have been signed between Tehran and Beijing during the era of former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in March 2021, it was expected to be implemented during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Beijing in February 2023. It is a development plan based on China's injection of \$400 billion into all sectors of the Iranian economy, and is expected to include cooperation in the energy sector, especially crude oil (*extraction, transportation, and refining*), nuclear energy, and petrochemicals.

As for infrastructure, China will invest in the transportation sector and develop railways, airports, and ports. Cooperation under the agreement will also focus on developing the banking sector and using the national currency, as well as combating money laundering and organized crime.

The two countries stressed that this agreement will be a major platform for cooperation in other areas such as technology, tourism, science, and exchange of training experiences related to the workforce and interaction between public and private sector agencies, leading to improved living standard and poverty reduction. In this context, this deal could contribute to strengthening Tehran's financial and strategic interests in Asia, as well as confirming its pivotal role within the framework in China's Belt and Road Initiative<sup>(17)</sup>.

***E- Strengthening Iran's role in the Belt and Road Initiative:***

The initiative is a long-term policy and investment program that aims to develop infrastructure and accelerate economic

integration of countries along the historic Silk Road, which was announced in the 1990s, but saw significant leaps with the advent of current Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. In this context, Iran itself, due to its distinguished geographical location linking the north and south, is considered a key axis in this initiative<sup>(18)</sup>.

In addition to the above, Iran believes that through its presence in the Belt and Road Initiative, it can create a large production and support network in Middle Eastern markets and connect to a market of 400 million customers through Tehran. Iranian customs cooperation with China is one of Tehran's other plans for cooperation within the framework of the Silk Road. Through this cooperation, goods can be transported from China and other countries in the region through Iran to Europe. This is becoming increasingly important as nearly 100 countries rely on transporting their goods through Iran. It is expected to achieve Iran's plan to increase its investments with China to \$100 billion over the next twenty years <sup>(19)</sup>.

***Second: The Impact of the Development of Sino-Iranian Relations on the Arab Region:***

*The impact of the development of Sino-Iranian relations in various fields has become clear through several dimensions, including:*

***1. The Political Dimension:***

***A. Achieving a Breakthrough in the Crises of the Region:***

The political progress in Sino-Iranian relations, which was most evident in the noticeable rapprochement between Beijing and Tehran after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018, and the advent of Raisi's government in August 2021, played a major role in encouraging Tehran to adopt a foreign policy that tends to develop relations with the major powers in the East, especially Russia and China, as well as the Arab countries.



This led China to play a mediating role in resuming relations between Tehran and Riyadh in March 2023, and also had a clear impact on the crises of the countries in the region.

Some estimates reveal that China has exerted a lot of pressure on Iran regarding the fact that its affiliated armed militias are one of the most prominent factors of instability in the Arab region. This is a point that China wants to guarantee will not affect its growing investments with the countries of the region, especially in some giant projects that are a major nucleus for China's global rise, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, of which the Arab region is a major part.

Indeed, there have been prominent indications of this, especially after the resumption of relations between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was represented in the emergence of a kind of appeasement in Yemen between the Iranian-backed Houthi group and the internationally recognized government affiliated with Riyadh. The most prominent features of this were the rounds of prisoner exchange and ceasefire agreements between the two parties.

This was paralleled by the return of Syria to the Arab League and the attendance of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the 32nd Arab League summit in mid-May 2023. Likewise, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani moved to develop his relations with the Arab countries to limit the growing Iranian influence, which was clearly evident in the visits that al-Sudani made to a number of Arab capitals such as Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh during the past few months <sup>(20)</sup>.

### ***B. Impact on Washington's Role in the Region:***

China's engagement in broader relations with the countries of the region has led to a decline in the role of the United States of America. The

most prominent indications of this were the demands of some of these countries, such as Iraq, for the need to prepare for a complete US withdrawal from the country. This is demanded by some political forces affiliated with Iran that are aligned with China, such as the Shiite Coordination Framework forces, in parallel with the fact that relations between China and Iraq itself have witnessed a significant boom during the study period, which has negatively affected the presence of American companies in Baghdad. In this context, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries exceeded the \$30 billion barrier, and in 2021, a coalition of Chinese companies "Holder", "Niker", and "San Yan" won industrial projects worth about \$20 billion in the Muthanna Governorate in southern Iraq. The Third Engineering Office for Chinese Construction also succeeded in obtaining another contract worth \$1.39 billion to build infrastructure projects in Iraq <sup>(21)</sup>.

On the other hand, some estimates reveal a decline in the American role in Iraq on the political and economic sides, especially in light of the many restrictions imposed by Washington on Baghdad regarding dollar smuggling, money laundering, and the spread of corruption, especially in the presence of other actors such as Russia and China <sup>(22)</sup>. The great solidarity between Tehran and Beijing has also led to the development of China's relationship with Syria as well. This was evident in the visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to China on September 21, 2023, which resulted in the signing of a comprehensive strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries and this was an indirect message that signifies a challenge to the US sanctions imposed on China, especially since the latter sent a private plane to Damascus to take Bashar al-Assad to the city of Hangzhou in eastern China <sup>(23)</sup>.

Based on this, it can be said that the Arab region in particular and the Middle East

in general have become one of the most prominent arenas of competition between Washington and Beijing. While Washington has been engaged in the issues of the East Asia region and the presence in China's vital field, and even forming economic partnerships and military alliances with some countries in this region such as Australia, Japan, and India, similar to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), China's recent strategies have focused on expanding in areas that were traditionally the influence of the United States, such as the Arab region <sup>(24)</sup>.

### ***C. Rising Chinese Influence:***

The development of China's relations with Iran since the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi has led to a strengthening of China's presence in the Arab region. As a result, Beijing has moved to form comprehensive strategic partnerships with Arab countries.

The most prominent indicators of this have been the strengthening of cooperation between the two sides within the framework of some important initiatives, such as the ***"Chinese-Arab Forum"*** initiative, which is an official dialogue platform between China and the League of Arab States. However, what is striking in this context is that China has always tried to deal with this matter very cleverly by balancing its interests with the Arab countries and some other active regional powers in the region, such as Iran and Turkey.

It is likely that Beijing's growing presence in the region will eventually lead to broader participation, especially since the emerging regional political arrangements pave the way for new challenges that will increase the role of regional powers amid the withdrawal of the United States.

Consequently, China can play its usual role in resolving the ongoing disputes between the countries of the region, which will lead to greater stability <sup>(25)</sup>.

### ***D. Attempting to Secure Chinese Support on disputed Issues between Regional States:***

China's extensive engagement in broader relations with regional states has led to competition between Iran and Arab regional states, particularly Gulf states that enjoy the highest level of cooperation with China. Despite China's adoption of what is known as the "strategic hedging" policy with both Iran and the Arab states, which allows it to develop strong diplomatic and economic ties without harming other important parties, this has changed in recent times. particularly, when China became more pragmatic, sometimes requiring it to prioritize the interests of one party over another.

This was evident before Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in December 2022, when he supported a peaceful solution to the three disputed UAE islands with Iran, moreover, demanding Tehran to stop destabilizing the region's security and stability.

This was completely rejected by Iran, which claims the three islands (*Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa*) are purely Iranian property.

Despite the Chinese support that Abu Dhabi received on the issue of the three islands during the Chinese president's visit to Saudi Arabia in December of last year, after a very short period, a high-ranking official from the Chinese Communist Party visited Iran and stressed that Beijing is keen to continue and even develop its relationship with Tehran as a reliable partner, emphasizing its support for Iran's territorial integrity <sup>(26)</sup>.

## ***2. The Military and Security Dimension:***

### ***A. China's Penetration of the Arms Market in the Arab Region:***

The increase in the pace of political and economic cooperation between Iran and the Arab states on the one hand and China on the





other has led to greater Chinese involvement in military and security issues within the region, particularly with regard to arms sales.

The most prominent indicators of this were the large arms deals that China entered into with both Saudi Arabia and the Arab Republic of Egypt, both of which were traditional allies of the United States.

In this context, the Asia Times reported in May 2023 that the Egyptian Air Force is preparing to acquire 12 J-10C aircraft from the Chinese Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation, a multi-role fighter characterized by advanced electronic warfare systems and an active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's 2022 report also revealed that Saudi Arabia aims to diversify its arms suppliers to expand and deepen its international networks in order to mitigate the negative effects of Western restrictions on arms sales <sup>(27)</sup>.

Some estimates indicate that the Saudi Arabian Military Industries Company (SAMI) has held negotiations with the China North Industries Corporation (Norinco), a state-owned defense company, to purchase weapons such as unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and air defense systems.

As a result, US officials have warned Arab countries against this reliance on Chinese weapons, arguing that it could undermine the US military's ability to integrate and perform its missions towards its partners in the region. Some statistics in this context indicate that Chinese arms sales in the Arab region have increased by 80% over the past decade, as a result of Beijing's expanding relations with its countries and its willingness to deliver weapons faster and on less stringent terms than Washington <sup>(28)</sup>.

### ***B. Enhancing China's Role in Combating Piracy and Maritime Security in the Region:***

China's interest in the Arab region at the level of maritime security has been noted since it sent its first naval escort team to the Gulf of Aden in 2008.

While the aim of the Chinese presence was to combat piracy, this role was later enhanced by the presence of the "People's Liberation Army Navy" in the Gulf of Aden, which was and still is one of the main pillars of developing relations with the Arab countries.

By 2010, its three-ship naval escort team had crossed the Strait of Hormuz and made its first visit to an Arab country when it arrived at Zayed Port in Abu Dhabi in March of that year <sup>(29)</sup>.

In the same context, China carried out large-scale operations to evacuate its citizens from Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015, which led to enhance its presence near critical maritime corridors such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab.

Since 2021, the People's Liberation Army Navy has sent ships to Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and continues to enhance its relations with the naval forces of the Arab countries, by conducting military exercises with these countries <sup>(30)</sup>.

A Pentagon report in February 2023 stated that Beijing is preparing to expand its military activity to include the establishment of quasi-military bases in several Arab countries, including Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, while Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are in a second phase. This comes primarily as a result of the expanded cooperation between Beijing and Tehran, which is considered one of the main players in the Arab region <sup>(31)</sup>.

***C. Expanding Cooperation Between China and the Region countries in the Field of Non-Traditional Security:***

Imposing the strengthening of understanding between Iran and China and the decline of the US role in the region have positive implications for the emergence of new patterns of cooperation at the security level between Beijing and the Arab region, especially with regard to non-traditional security.

In addition to joint efforts to combat COVID-19 and climate change, there has been an increase in joint counter-terrorism training and cooperation in the field of cyber and digital security.

The most prominent indicator of this was the signing of the Cooperation Initiative on Data Security between China and the League of Arab States in 2021.

The following years witnessed an increase in Arab-Chinese cooperation in new security areas, such as China training 1,500 Arab citizens on network security, in parallel with strengthening cooperation in combating organized crime, terrorism, and extremism, and coordinating efforts and exchanging knowledge in intelligence areas related to early warning risks, security risk assessment, and prevention of cybercrimes.

Dual-use technologies are also included within the scope of security cooperation.

In addition, the areas of cooperation included aviation and space, including China's commitment to implementing a series of remote sensing and space communications projects in the Gulf, as well as exploiting space resources and expanding space infrastructure.

While these patterns of cooperation appear to be civilian on the surface, they can have distinct military applications, such as access to military information from the Chinese "Beidou" satellite navigation system, which

works to improve intelligence capabilities and precision-guided weapons <sup>(32)</sup>.

***3- The Economic Dimension:***

***A. Strengthening Iran's Economic Openness to the Countries of the Region:***

The development of Iranian-Chinese relations coincided with one of the main determinants of Tehran's foreign policy agenda under Ebrahim Raisi, which was to expand Iran's relations with the Arab countries.

The appointment of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, an expert on regional affairs and former ambassador to a number of Arab countries, was a prominent indicator of this.

Overall, this has led to an increase in trade between Iran and the Arab countries in general, and the Gulf countries in particular. In June 2023, Rahmatollah Kharamali, Director General of the Middle East, Caucasus and Russia Office at the Iranian Trade Organization, announced that the volume of trade exchange between Iran and the Gulf Arab states reached more than \$3 billion during the first two months of the current Iranian year (*starting March 21*). Although this figure is low, it represents a significant improvement, especially since some of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia, had cut off political and economic relations with Iran before the attack on its embassy in Iran in 2016 <sup>(33)</sup>.

***B. Rising Economic Cooperation between China and the Countries of the Region:***

Some estimates reveal that while China has strengthened its economic relations with Iran through a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement, it has also increased its economic cooperation with the Arab countries. China has deepened its economic relations with some Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, and Egypt, especially in strategic areas such



as infrastructure, communications, technology, and energy, in which China is a leading country.

This was evident in Beijing's participation in the renovation of the infrastructure of the Grand Mosque, and the construction of the central economic zone in the administrative capital of the Arab Republic of Egypt, which is of great strategic importance to China, due to its strategic location and its ability to act as an important regional center for manufacturing and maritime shipping<sup>(34)</sup>.

The development of relations between Tehran and Beijing has led the latter to invest heavily in countries such as Iraq and Syria, especially in infrastructure and reconstruction projects. Statistics indicate that Iraq was the largest beneficiary of Belt and Road Initiative loans in 2021, receiving approximately \$10.5 billion in construction contracts in a year that ended with China announcing that it would build 1,000 mega-projects in Iraq.

In 2022, Arab countries collectively expanded their cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative with China. They received about 23% of the Belt and Road Initiative's engagements (*up from 16.5% the previous year*) and about 21% of China's investment volume - double the share in 2021. Saudi Arabia was the second largest national recipient of Belt and Road Initiative investments last year, at \$5.6 billion, after Hungary<sup>(35)</sup>.

***Third: Proposals to Address Some of the Negative Implications of the Development of Sino-Iranian Relations on the Arab Region:***

***These proposals can be presented as follows:***

### ***1. The Political Dimension:***

#### ***A. Pushing China Towards More Stability in the Region:***

The negative implications associated with the Iranian-Arab competition to strengthen

relations with China at the political level can be reduced by the latter adopting a more cautious strategy to prevent the loss of the positive effects of its stability-building efforts in the region.

It is preferable for China to avoid siding with certain parties at the expense of others, especially during visits by its officials to the countries of the region.

#### ***B. The Orientation of the Countries of the Region Towards a More Balanced Foreign Policy:***

Beijing's growing role in the Arab region will create promising opportunities for the countries of the region to diversify their foreign policies and move away from a policy of relying on the United States, especially in the case of the Gulf countries.

This is evident in the tendency of some of the region's active powers, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Arab Republic of Egypt, to build partnerships with other major powers, such as Russia. This is evidenced by the stance taken by these three countries on the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.

### ***2- The Military and Security Dimension:***

#### ***A. Avoiding Provocative Policies Towards Washington by the Countries of the Region:***

The negative implications on the Arab countries resulting from the development of Iranian-Chinese relations at the security level can be reduced by considering the role of the United States of America in the region, which is still present in the region, especially in light of Washington's belief that China is expanding its role in the Arab region for the purpose of spying on its activities.

The evidence for this is that when some intelligence sources revealed the UAE's

intention to grant a military base to China, it faced a strong reaction from the United States until the idea was abandoned. This may prompt China in the next stage to engage strongly in the region on the security level.

***B. China's Orientation Towards Working Through Joint Security Initiatives:***

China can follow an approach based on “*peace through development*” by promoting “*shared security concepts*”, which differ from the “traditional security concept” led by the West and which focuses on seeking to achieve security by defeating the enemy and maintaining exclusive military alliances.

This can be done through some Chinese initiatives that can aim to promote political dialogue between competing countries and establish multilateral arrangements to reduce distrust and expand common interests.

Although this lacks clarity in the short term about the actual mechanisms for achieving these goals, especially in light of the ongoing conflicts, a long-term strategy can be followed in this regard, which is effective in light of the call by Chinese ambassadors in the region to follow an alternative approach to the security initiatives led by the United States.

***3. The Economic Dimension:***

***A. A Chinese Approach Based on Multi-Party Economic Initiatives:***

The economic competition between Iran and the countries of the region over the strengthening of economic cooperation with China can be overcome by the latter using its economic tools to influence the political and economic elites in both the Arab region and Iran to interact in a collective framework and avoid political differences in order to ensure

a minimum level of stability that provides an environment conducive to the growth of Chinese economic activities with the countries of the region.

Considering the turmoil in global energy markets since the Ukrainian war, China needs stability in the Middle East, where it gets more than 40% of its crude oil imports from the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

***B. Considering of Washington's interests in the region by china:***

China should avoid direct negative friction with the United States, especially with regard to its economic interests with some Gulf countries and Iraq that have special relations with Washington.

In fact, China, within the framework of the multi-party approach, can partner with the United States, the Arab countries, and Iran in some economic projects, which will reduce the impact of the negative implications of political differences on economic relations.

***C. Pushing China Towards More Economic Reforms in the Arab Region:***

Given the conflict in economic policies between China on the one hand and the Arab countries and Iran on the other, Beijing can make more efforts to reduce the negative results associated with the different approaches of economic systems.

This can also be done on the model of the reforms that China is carrying out domestically, which ensure rapid high-quality growth by emphasizing the role of the state in meeting local consumption, stopping the rapid accumulation of debt, and redistributing wealth to address economic inequality and using the technology sector as a driver of long-term growth.





### **Conclusion:**

*It is not expected that Beijing will develop its relations with Iran to the extent that it jeopardizes its interests elsewhere in the Arab region. Although Tehran seeks to show that it has alternatives to the West, Beijing's policy will be dictated by its broader regional and global interests, not least of which is the urgent need for Iran to settle its nuclear program issue with the West and get rid of the economic sanctions imposed on it.*

*Despite the state of calm that the region enjoyed after the signing of the agreement to resume relations between Tehran and Riyadh with Chinese mediation, this does not negate the fact that the security situation in the Arab region is controversial given the continuation of some of the serious crises in the region, especially in Yemen and Syria.*

*Therefore, China faces a real challenge in protecting its interests and maintaining security and stability in the region, and China's role under these emerging security arrangements remains unclear. Therefore, it is not expected that China will be prepared to play the role that the United States plays on the security level, as Beijing has not shown much interest in assuming this responsibility so far.*

*In fact, China's increased influence in Iran can be useful in terms of restricting Iranian nuclear activities and reducing active support for its regional proxies if Beijing and Washington can reach political and security understandings on this matter, especially since Iran has refused to make its regional role in the region one of the files that can be negotiated with the (4+1) group.*

### **References:**

- (1) Stephen Walt, Keeping the World "Off-Balance": Self-Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy. In J. Ikenberry (Ed.), America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power, (New York, Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 121-130.
- (2) Stephen M. Walt, International Relations: One World, Many Theories, Foreign Policy, No 110, Special Edition: Frontiers of Knowledge, Spring 1998, P. 31.
- (3) نقلاً عن صحيفة المتعلمين الصادرة بالفارسية: محمد جهاد، چالشها و راهبردهای توسعه روابط ایران و چین، روزنامه فرهیختگان.  
<https://cutt.ly/w8RTBMM> (28 Feb 2023)
- (4) نقلاً عن صحيفة (عالم الاقتصاد) الصادرة باللغة الفارسية: سيدمحسن قمصری، نشانهای تمایل چین برای توسعه روابط انرژی با ایران، دنیای اقتصاد.  
<https://cutt.ly/l8RIQqd> (23 Feb 2023)
- (5) نقلاً عن صحيفة "شرق" الصادرة باللغة الفارسية: جاوید قرباناوغلی، توازن در سیاست خارجی، روزنامه شرق.  
<https://cutt.ly/M8RJ0LW> (25 Jul 2022).
- (6) نقلاً عن صحيفة "الدبلوماسية الإيرانية": هال برنرز، كشورهای که برای شکست نظم امریکایی تلاش می کنند اتحاد روسیه، ایران و چین در برابر ایالات متحده، دیپلماسی ایرانی.  
<https://rb.gy/kals1f> (6 Sep 2022).
- (7) Taylore Roth, China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 28, 2021, pp 5-9.
- (8) Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, The Impact and Implications of China's Growing Influence in the Middle East, The Diplomat.  
<https://goo.su/QbcbB> (9Jul 2022).

- (۹) نقلاً عن موقع الدبلوماسية الإيرانية الصادر باللغة الفارسية: حسن کرمی نژاد، چه کنیم روابط پکن و کشورهای عربی تهدید نشود مسئله چین و امنیت منطقه ای جمهوری اسلامی ایران، دیپلماسی ایرانی.  
<http://goo.su/NHeleg>(4Jan 2023).
- (10) Vahid Ghorbani, An Analysis of China's Military: Diplomacy towards Iran, Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter- Spring 2021, pp. 279-305.
- (11) Tuvia Gering, Jason M. Brodsky, Not "business as usual": The Chinese military's visit to Iran, The Middle East Institute.  
<https://goo.su/2ZjBTN>(16May 2022)
- (12) Ibid.
- (۱۳) نقلاً عن صحيفة شرق الصادرة باللغة الفارسية: - وزیر اقتصاد: ۲۰ تفاهمنامه اقتصادی ایران با چین امضا میشود، روزنامه شرق.  
<https://t.ly/Wm2S>(14 Feb 2023).
- (14) How Will Ebrahim Raisi Deal With China?, The Gulf International Forum, <https://gulfif.org/how-will-ebrahim-raisi-deal-with-china/> (10 Jul 2021).
- (15) Raisi's visit to Beijing expected to deepen China-Iran relations, consolidate traditional friendship, Global Times.  
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285281.shtml>(12Feb 2023).
- (16) Iran Boosts Cheap Oil Sale to China Despite Sanctions, Voice of America.  
<https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-boosts-cheap-oil-sale-to-china-despite-sanctions-/6935635.html> (26Jan 2023).
- (۱۷) نقلاً عن موقع الدبلوماسية الإيرانية الصادر باللغة الفارسية: عبدالرحمن فتح الهی، اندر حکایت قراردادی پر حاشیه: سند همکاری ۲۵ ساله ایران و چین، "فرصت" یا "تهدیدی" برای منافع تهران، دیپلماسی ایرانی.  
<https://goo.su/fOMhHP>(10 Jul 2020).
- (18) Parviz Ahadi, China's road and belt strategy and the role of Iran's sphere of influence, Political Sociology Research Journal, Volume 3, Issue1, November 2020, Pp 994-1017.
- (۱۹) نقلاً عن دوریه العلاقات الخارجية الصادرة باللغة الفارسية: محسن شریعتی نیا، حمیدرضا عزیزی، همکاری ایران و چین در کمربند اقتصادی جاده ابریشم، فصلنامه روابط خارجی، سال نهم، شماره چهارم، زمستان ۱۳۹۶، ص ص ۱-۵.
- (20) Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, Ibid.
- (۲۱) شراكة نوعية: كيف تطورت العلاقات النفطية بين العراق والصين؟، المستقبل للأبحاث والدراسات المتقدمة.  
<https://shorturl.at/mtMQ9> (15 feb 2021)
- (22) Marc Lynch, Does the Decline of U.S. Power Matter For the Middle East?, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.  
<https://shorturl.at/begJ0> (March 19, 2019).
- (۲۳) تقاطع المصالح: ما دلالات زيارة الرئيس السوري إلى الصين؟، الحائط العربي.  
<https://shorturl.at/nwyP7>(24 sep 2023).
- (24) Aya Batrawy, Rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran restore ties, with China's help. Here's why it matters, Npr.  
<https://shorturl.at/nxCIQ> (10 Mar 2023)
- (25) Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, Ibid.
- (۲۶) نقلاً عن صحيفة "آفتاب یزد" الصادرة باللغة الفارسية: فرشید فرحناکیان، تاثیر ژئواستراتژی چین در عربستان بر ایران، روزنامه آفتاب یزد.  
<https://aftabeyazd.ir/index.php?newsid=253> (24 Dec2022)
- (27) Gabriel Honrada, China seizing US arms markets in the Middle East, Asia Times.  
<https://shorturl.at/fuK04> (26 May 2023)
- (28) Alvite Ningthoujam, The Middle East: An Emerging Market for Chinese Arms Exports, The Diplomat.  
<https://shorturl.at/fszO7> (June 25, 2021).
- (29) Camille Lons, China's great game in the Middle East, European Council On Foreign Relations.  
[https://ecfr.eu/publication/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east/) (October 21, 2019).
- (30) Blake Herzinger, Ben Lefkowitz, China's Growing Naval Influence in the Middle East, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.  
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-growing-naval-influence-middle-east> (Feb 17, 2023).
- (31) Tuvia Gering, Full throttle in neutral: China's new security architecture for the Middle East, Issue Brief, February 15, 2023.
- (32) Ibid.
- (۳۳) حجم التبادل التجاري بين إيران ودول الخليج الفارسي يبلغ أكثر من ۳ مليارات دولار خلال شهرين، وكالة أنباء مهر.  
<https://shorturl.at/fTUV8>(26 Aug 2023)
- (34) Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal, Ibid.
- (35) Nicholas Larsen, Warming China-Arab, Relations Are Dramatically Reorientating the Global Economic Landscape, International Banker.  
<https://shorturl.at/coxE4> (March 14, 2023).



## The impact of the development of Chinese-Iranian relations on the Arab region

■ Mervat Zakaria

Researcher in Iranian Studies

PhD student at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University

### Abstract:

The most prominent determinants of this study revolved around the Iranian goals of developing relations with Beijing, which were evident on the political side in the desire to strengthen the strategy of confrontation with Washington and the presence of an internal trend in Iran that encourages pursuing this path, in parallel with coordination with China in various conflict areas. As for the effects caused by the development of relations between China and Iran, they became clear in the political field in bringing about a solution to the crises of the countries of the Arab region, and reducing Washington's role in parallel with the rise of the Chinese role. In the military field, China has entered the region's arms market and expanded its role in the field of non-traditional security, combating piracy, and enhancing maritime security. On the economic side, the rate of trade exchange between China and the Arab countries increased, and this was accompanied by entering into new economic partnerships. The study ended by presenting some proposals aimed at reducing the negative repercussions associated with the development of relations between Tehran and Beijing on the Arab region.

**Keywords:** Iran - China - the Arab region - Iranian-Chinese relations - Chinese-Arab relations

## تأثير تطور العلاقات الصينية - الإيرانية على المنطقة العربية

■ مرفت زكريا

باحث في الدراسات الإيرانية

طالبة دكتوراه بكلية الاقتصاد والعلوم السياسية - جامعة القاهرة

### مستخلص:

تمحورت أبرز محددات هذه الدراسة حول الأهداف الإيرانية لتطوير العلاقات مع بكين، والتي اتضحت على الجانب السياسي في الرغبة بتعزيز استراتيجية المواجهة مع واشنطن ووجود اتجاه داخلي في إيران محفز على السعي في هذا المسار، بالتوازي مع التنسيق مع الصين في مناطق الصراعات المختلفة. وفيما يتعلق بالبعد الأمني العسكري، فترغب إيران في إرساء مزيد من الاستقرار في منطقة غرب آسيا، والحصول على التكنولوجيا العسكرية الصينية المتقدمة. أما على الصعيد الاقتصادي فتستهدف إيران تخطي العقوبات الاقتصادية الغربية المفروضة عليها، وتعزيز دورها في مبادرة "الحزام والطريق"، ورفع معدل التبادل التجاري مع بكين.

وبالنسبة للتأثيرات التي أحدثتها تطور العلاقات بين الصين وإيران، فأتضح بالمراسل السياسي في إحداث انفرجحة في أزمات دول المنطقة العربية، والحد من دور واشنطن بالتوازي مع صعود الدور الصيني. وفي المجال العسكري، اقتحمت الصين سوق السلاح بالمنطقة، ووسعت من دورها في مجال الأمن غير التقليدي ومواجهة القرصنة وتعزيز الأمن البحري. وعلى الجانب الاقتصادي زاد معدل التبادل التجاري بين الصين والدول العربية، وصاحب ذلك الدخول في شراكات اقتصادية جديدة. وانتهت الدراسة بتقديم بعض المقترحات الهادفة للحد من التداعيات السلبية المرتبطة بتطور العلاقات بين طهران وبكين على المنطقة العربية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إيران - الصين - المنطقة العربية - العلاقات الإيرانية الصينية - العلاقات الصينية العربية