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Analysis of the Geopolitical Impacts of the 25-Year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement, with Emphasis on Regional Consequences

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ABSTRACT

The 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement is one of the most significant geopolitical accords of the past two decades, formed in a context marked by great-power rivalry, shifts in security patterns in West Asia, transformations in the global energy structure, and the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative. This agreement not only has the potential to reshape Iran's geopolitical position but may also alter regional dynamics in areas such as energy security, balance of power, the security order of the Persian Gulf, transit networks, and the relations of influential regional actors. The present study, relying on scientific findings, qualitative analyses, comparative evaluation, and data extracted from contemporary literature, investigates the regional implications of this agreement and seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of its impact on the future of geopolitical interactions. The findings of this study indicate that the agreement creates significant regional consequences through three main pathways: first, enhancing Iran's geo-economic position within regional transportation and energy networks through its role in the Belt and Road Initiative; second, strengthening Iran's balancing capacities against U.S. pressure through convergence with China as a rising power; and third, influencing the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf and the competition among regional actors. The analysis further shows that China, through its foreign policy principles of "non-interference" and "balancing strategy," has simultaneously strengthened its relations with both Iran and Arab states, a posture that carries both positive and negative implications for Iran's regional standing. On the one hand, it may create opportunities for expanding economic cooperation and energy security; on the other hand, it may impose constraints on deepening security and military cooperation with China. The final analysis asserts that the 25-year cooperation agreement can lead to an improvement in Iran's regional position only if accompanied by proactive regional strategies, alignment with great-power competition, and the intelligent utilization of geo-economic capacities. Aiming to offer an analytical and future-oriented perspective, this article explores the regional dimensions of the agreement and emphasizes the opportunities, threats, and strategic pathways available to Iran.

Keywords: *25-year cooperation agreement, geopolitics, Iran, China, regional implications.*

Introduction

Geopolitical developments in West Asia over recent decades indicate that the region is experiencing one of the most sensitive historical periods in its modern era. Shifts in power patterns, the emergence of new actors, the relative decline of the United States, China's increasing presence in energy, trade, and infrastructure, and the

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intensifying competition among regional states have collectively brought the previous regional order into structural challenge. Within this context, the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement is not regarded merely as an economic accord, but rather as a foundational geopolitical development, as it has the capacity to influence the balance of power, energy security, transit networks, and strategic relations among regional actors (1-3). The importance of this agreement must be assessed within the framework of China's rise, the expansion of its geo-economic influence, and its efforts to advance the Belt and Road Initiative. Over recent years, China has sought to ensure energy security while simultaneously establishing a stable and extensive economic presence in West Asia (4, 5). According to recent analyses, China considers Iran a key link connecting East Asia to the Middle East and subsequently to Europe, and this geo-economic position has made the signing of the agreement highly significant at the regional level (2, 6). Iran's geopolitical position—situated at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf, possessing vast energy reserves, access to open waters, and vital transportation corridors—is of strategic importance from China's perspective (7, 8). The 25-year agreement can therefore strengthen Iran's role in China's transnational infrastructure networks and position the country as a pivotal node in new transit routes (8).

At the regional level, Arab states of the Persian Gulf have also expanded their ties with China in recent years. Studies indicate that China simultaneously pursues a "balancing strategy" among Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, avoiding dependency on any single side while seeking to maintain and deepen relations with all key actors (5, 9). This strategy yields dual implications for Iran: on the one hand, it provides opportunities for more active participation in regional economic networks; on the other hand, it demonstrates that China does not fully align with any side in Middle Eastern rivalries, which may introduce constraints to deeper security and military cooperation (10, 11). In the domain of energy security, the 25-year agreement can fundamentally influence Iran–China relations. China is now the world's largest energy importer, and stability in the Persian Gulf is vital to Beijing. Iran, with its abundant oil and gas reserves, can thus serve as a reliable long-term partner. This relationship not only benefits both countries but also shifts the mechanisms of regional energy security (12, 13).

The 25-year cooperation agreement also has major implications for the geopolitical rivalry of great powers. Some analyses suggest that the agreement is partly situated within the broader strategic competition between China and the United States in West Asia, a factor that has generated sensitivities among both regional and extra-regional actors (14, 15). Moreover, India—due to its own strategic rivalry with China—has expressed concern over deepening Iran–China cooperation. This situation may affect the future of competing corridor projects such as the Chabahar Port and South Asian energy routes (16, 17). Overall, the 25-year cooperation agreement is not merely an economic or infrastructural document; it is one of the determinants shaping the emerging regional order and can influence future interactions among Iran and regional actors, the balance of power, energy security, and geo-economic pathways. Accordingly, studying the regional consequences of this agreement is essential for a precise understanding of the future geopolitical landscape of West Asia. The significance of the present study arises from the fact that most previous research on the agreement has been general, political, or economic, with a notable lack of region-focused, geopolitically grounded analyses. This study therefore seeks to fill this scholarly gap by examining the regional implications and the complex geopolitical dynamics surrounding the agreement (18).

Geopolitical developments in recent years in West Asia—particularly following intensified competition among regional and extra-regional powers—have led to fundamental changes in the structure of the balance of power. In this context, the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement has emerged as a comprehensive and long-term framework whose potential regional impact requires rigorous academic investigation (19). The central question

concerns how the agreement can create structural changes in Iran's regional position and through which geo-economic and geo-strategic pathways it may influence energy security, geo-economic competition, the behavior of Arab actors, and the involvement of extra-regional powers. On one hand, China seeks to expand its economic and infrastructural influence and strengthen mutual interdependence with West Asian states; on the other hand, Iran aims to utilize the agreement to enhance its regional role and bargaining power, given its unique geopolitical and geo-economic characteristics. Nevertheless, the region's geopolitical complexities—including the rivalry between Iran and several Arab states, the presence of China's strategic competitors such as India, U.S. pressure on Tehran, and the security sensitivities of the Persian Gulf—have made the agreement's consequences multidimensional, complex, and highly dependent on shifting regional conditions (4, 9). Some studies indicate that while China has deepened cooperation with Iran, it has simultaneously expanded its engagement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, necessitating a careful evaluation of Iran's real capabilities in leveraging the agreement (5, 11). Furthermore, China's rise and its rivalry with the United States and India have altered the broader geopolitical environment of the region, placing any long-term Iran–China cooperation under external pressure (14, 16). Therefore, the research problem concerns how and at what levels the regional consequences of this agreement can be analyzed and what opportunities and challenges it may create for Iran. The primary research gap lies in the fact that most existing studies have adopted general or economic approaches, while a comprehensive geopolitical assessment of the agreement's regional implications remains underdeveloped—despite the necessity of systematic and theoretically informed analysis in a context characterized by dynamic regional rivalries and geo-economic competition (18).

To address this research problem, the study is structured around three fundamental questions:

1. What effects does the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement have on the balance of power and the geopolitical order of West Asia?
2. Through which geo-economic and geo-strategic pathways can the agreement strengthen or weaken Iran's regional position?
3. What implications does the agreement hold for Iran's relations with key regional actors—such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey—as well as for the involvement of extra-regional powers?

Literature Review

Research on the regional consequences of the Iran–China cooperation agreement has grown notably in recent years, although much of it remains limited to economic or bilateral aspects, with few region-centered geopolitical analyses. Some Persian-language studies have addressed the agreement's general implications. For example, studies examining Iran's position in the Belt and Road Initiative argue that although the agreement may revitalize Iran's transit capacities, structural infrastructure limitations may hinder full integration, emphasizing that Iran's transit potential can only be realized through sustained bilateral cooperation (8). Another study focusing on security implications concludes that China, adhering to its policy of non-interference, does not intend to enter regional security confrontations in the Persian Gulf; therefore, cooperation with Iran will remain primarily economic unless Iran alters aspects of its regional behavior (3, 11).

In Persian-language research on economic dimensions, some analyses argue that the regional impact of the agreement depends on the extent of Chinese investment and Iran's integration into global supply chains (20). Another study shows that Arab states' reactions to the agreement are shaped mainly by their competition with Iran, while China avoids taking sides by maintaining balanced relations (9). Among foreign-language studies, analyses

of China's regional strategy in the Persian Gulf emphasize that Beijing seeks to construct an economic–infrastructural order in which hard security plays a limited role, leading China to maintain balanced relations with both Iran and Arab states (4, 5). Research on China's energy routes positions Iran as one of the three strategic nodes for meeting East Asia's energy demands (13). Another body of research highlights India's concerns, showing that deeper Iran–China cooperation threatens New Delhi's regional connectivity projects (16). Additional research examining the historical and modern Silk Road context concludes that China perceives Iran as a necessary but not dominant partner, a viewpoint that carries implications for Iran's regional coherence and influence (6). A review of the existing literature illustrates that although valuable work has been conducted, a comprehensive geopolitical and geo-economic evaluation of the agreement's regional implications remains scarce—precisely the gap this study aims to address.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Analyzing the regional implications of the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement requires the application of an integrated theoretical framework capable of explaining structural changes in the international environment, the use of soft-power and economic instruments, and the strategic mechanisms embedded within economic diplomacy. Accordingly, the present theoretical foundations are organized into three main components: (1) conceptual foundations and key definitions, (2) macro-level theories of international relations and applied geopolitics, and (3) interdisciplinary theories and approaches related to geoeconomics, regionalism, and great-power competition. The combination of these approaches enables a multilayered analysis of regional implications at structural, operational, and actor-based levels. In this study, the concept of "geopolitical position" is interpreted beyond geographical location, incorporating access to energy resources, roles in transit corridors, communication structures, and regional linkages that allow a state to convert its geographical position into geopolitical capital. In this sense, Iran is not only an energy-rich actor but, due to its location along strategic transit chokepoints and access to open waters, possesses geoeconomic conversion capacity—an analytical foundation used throughout this study (12, 20).

Structural realism teaches us that actors in the international system behave according to the relative distribution of capabilities, and any major shift in this distribution—such as China's economic and diplomatic rise—activates balancing mechanisms and alliance formations at the regional level. From a realist perspective, the 25-year agreement can serve as an instrument for redefining regional balances, as long-term commitments between Tehran and Beijing have the potential to shift the cost–benefit calculations of regional and extra-regional actors and must therefore be interpreted within the context of U.S.–China structural rivalry and broader regional competition (14, 15). Analytical studies further demonstrate that China tends toward "balancing behavior" in the Middle East—cooperating simultaneously with Iran and Gulf Arab states to prevent unilateral dominance and to safeguard its energy and transit interests (5, 9).

Geoeconomic theory emphasizes economic tools as instruments of power: infrastructure investment, long-term energy contracts, port development, railway expansion, and the creation of supply chains—all functioning as mechanisms for enhancing influence and strategic leverage. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a prominent example of geoeconomic implementation, and Iran—due to its position along the southern corridors and the Persian Gulf—is considered a key regional actor in this network. Specialized BRI assessments show that China's infrastructural investments can generate mutual dependence and increase strategic influence; however,

such outcomes are conditioned by contract transparency, financial sustainability, and the institutional capacity of the host country. Without these conditions, risks such as debt exposure and weakening of local interests become probable—an outcome noted in global development analyses and sectoral reports (4, 6).

The theory of new regionalism and the concept of "regional network-building" help explain how infrastructural and economic connections give rise to regional economic hegemonies that differ from traditional military–political hegemony. Over the past decade, China has attempted to construct such an economic–diplomatic framework through institutional mechanisms such as the China–Arab Cooperation Forum and regional summits, in which it simultaneously engages multiple regional actors within an economic sphere. This process can reshape the balance of interests in the Persian Gulf and West Asia and positions the Iran–China agreement as a concrete manifestation of economic regionalism (1, 2).

Soft-balancing theory and the "game-changing mechanisms" approach explain how states employ non-military instruments—investment, economic diplomacy, and political mediation—to reduce threats and widen their strategic space. The 25-year agreement can serve as a tool for Iran to partially mitigate sanctions-related pressures and enhance its diplomatic bargaining capacity with regional powers. However, these same mechanisms may simultaneously create networks that link local interests to transnational interests, producing new dependencies that are challenging to manage—an observation reflected in recent analytical assessments of China's stability-oriented and non-ideological regional strategy (3, 11).

For operational analysis, it is necessary to define and evaluate concepts such as "energy interdependence," "corridor sensitivities," and "long-term commitment mechanisms." Energy interdependence refers to China's significant share of energy imports from the region and its need to ensure the continuity of these flows while sharing supply risks. Trade and energy import data indicate that Iran and the Gulf states occupy meaningful positions in China's energy portfolio, making the stability of these flows a key driver of Beijing's regional policy (5, 13). Meanwhile, structural analyses of transit networks show that Iran's integration into BRI routes or the North–South Corridor can generate strategic shifts in transit patterns and market access—provided institutional and financial barriers are addressed (8).

At the level of impact measurement, this study employs an analytical reasoning model: structural variables (distribution of power, China's energy priorities, regional balance conditions) are first identified; intermediary variables (infrastructure investment, level of integration into value chains, responses of regional actors) are then evaluated; and observable outcomes related to energy security, military–political balance, and economic networks are subsequently extracted. This structure enables the inclusion of both qualitative and measurable parameters—such as China's share of energy imports from Iran/the Gulf, annual Chinese investment volumes in Iran, and the number of finalized infrastructural agreements—which will be calculated and presented in tabular and graphical form in the analysis section. Overall, the integrated theoretical foundations of this study are based on: (a) structural realism for understanding power distribution, (b) geoeconomics for interpreting economic and infrastructural instruments of influence, (c) new regionalism for analyzing regional network-building, and (d) soft balancing for assessing non-military behaviors of actors. This combination provides a multilayered analytical framework for explaining the regional implications of the 25-year agreement from both structural and process-oriented perspectives, while enabling the definition of quantitative and qualitative indicators for hypothesis evaluation.

The United States' Perspective on the China–Iran Agreement

From the perspective of the United States, the 25-year China–Iran agreement raises significant geopolitical concerns. The agreement signals to Washington that Iran—supported by a rising power such as China—may strengthen its regional role and circumvent the limitations imposed by sanctions (10, 15). The United States is concerned that China's large-scale investments in Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors could enable Tehran to gain greater economic and political autonomy, reducing the effectiveness of U.S. pressure (4). From the standpoint of U.S. foreign policy, the agreement is interpreted as a "geopolitical maneuver" challenging American influence in the region (14). Washington and several analysts argue that the expansion of Iran–China military and security cooperation—especially in technology and strategic infrastructure—could undermine U.S. security interests in the Middle East (21).

American analysts further emphasize that the agreement forms part of the broader strategic rivalry between China and the United States and must be viewed within the framework of China's efforts to rebuild its influence across Eurasia and the Persian Gulf (6). Additionally, the United States perceives the agreement as Iran's response to U.S. sanctions pressure, potentially strengthening Tehran's economic and political resilience (16). Ultimately, the United States views the agreement as a potential threat to regional stability and its own influence in the Middle East, though it continues to rely on diplomatic avenues to limit its impact (19).

Research Method

The research method of this study is designed based on a qualitative–combined approach, as the nature of the subject—analyzing the regional implications of the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement—consists of a combination of geopolitical, geoeconomic, structural, and behavioral variables that cannot be sufficiently explained through descriptive or purely quantitative methods. To analyze the multidimensional aspects of the agreement within the complex environment of West Asia, the study uses directed content analysis, deductive–inferential analysis, comparative data analysis, and scenario analysis. The multi-method approach was selected because the complexity of Iran–China relations, the role of structural factors (such as great-power competition), and the dynamic nature of regional conditions require a multidimensional interpretive framework.

Data Collection Method

Data collection was conducted in three stages.

The first stage involved reviewing official documents, government statements, and the full text of the 25-year cooperation agreement, which serve as primary data.

The second stage included content analysis of academic articles, books, research reports, strategic center analyses (such as those from institutions like Carnegie, Chatham House, and the Council on Foreign Relations), and reports related to the Belt and Road Initiative, which reflect diverse analytical perspectives on the regional consequences of the agreement.

The third stage involved using extracted data from the main thesis, including tables assessing Iran's geopolitical position, comparisons of regional countries' reactions, and analyses of balancing effects.

Type of Data Analysis

Three analytical levels were used to interpret the data:

1. **Structural analysis**, which examines changes in regional balance of power and China's role in the Middle East through the lens of structural realism.
2. **Geoeconomic analysis**, which interprets models of economic interlinkage, interdependence indicators, and infrastructural power.
3. **Actor-oriented analysis**, which investigates the behavior of Iran, Arab countries, India, and the United States in response to the agreement.

For processing qualitative data, the three-stage coding model (open–axial–selective) was used.

In the open coding stage, major categories such as "Iran's geopolitical position," "China's strategy," "energy security interests," and "regional actors' competition" were identified.

In the axial coding stage, relationships among categories (such as the link between Chinese investment and the enhancement of Iran's geoeconomic influence) were analyzed.

In the selective coding stage, the main categories were integrated into three final axes: "geopolitical implications," "geoeconomic implications," and "behavioral implications."

Research Variables

Table 1. Organized and Categorized Research Variables

Components / Description	Variable Name	Variable Type
Includes economic, energy, infrastructure, defense–security, technology, and mutual commitments	25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement	Independent variable
Changes in the ratio of military, economic, and political power of states in the region	1. Regional balance of power	Dependent variables
Impact on Iran's geopolitical and transit importance in the region	2. Iran's role in transit corridors	
Influence on energy supply, stability, and trade flows	3. Energy security and export–import flows	
Reactions and policy shifts of Arab states in the region toward Iran	4. Behavior of Gulf Arab countries	
Positions and actions of the United States, India, and Russia regarding Iran–China cooperation	5. Reactions of major powers	
Volume and intensity of operational investments and joint projects	1. China's actual investment level in Iran	Mediating variables
Iran's managerial, legal, and infrastructural capacity to benefit from cooperation	2. Iran's institutional–infrastructural capacity	
Intensity of competition among states for influence over transit routes	3. Corridor competition among regional states	
Level of strategic rivalry between the United States and China	4. Intensity of U.S.–China confrontation	
Iran's regional diplomatic orientation and actions	5. Iran's regional foreign policy	

Defining Measurement Indicators

1. Geoeconomic Influence Index (GEI)

Proposed formula:

$$GEI = \frac{(I + T + E)}{3}$$

- *I* = average volume of Chinese investment
- *T* = average changes in transit routes
- *E* = Iran's share in China's energy imports

This index can be calculated using the thesis data (Table, page 99 of the thesis).

2. Regional Balance Index (RBI)

Based on three variables:

$$RBI = \alpha(C) + \beta(M) + \gamma(P)$$

- *C* = level of Iran–China cooperation
- *M* = military–security responses of regional states
- *P* = U.S. political pressure and sanctions

Weights used: 0.5, 0.3, and 0.2 (based on the referenced model).

3. Energy Security Index (ESI)

$$ESI = \frac{(S + R + D)}{3}$$

- *S* = supply stability
- *R* = regional political risk
- *D* = diversification of energy export routes

According to thesis data (Table, page 108), increased Iran–China cooperation raises *S* and reduces *R*.

Geopolitical Analysis (Macro Level)

At this stage, Iran's geopolitical position before and after the 25-year cooperation agreement is evaluated using the Regional Power Influence Index (RPI):

$$RPI = \frac{(N_c \times W_c) + (A_r \times W_r) + (S_p \times W_s)}{3}$$

- *N_c* = number of Iran–China military–security cooperations
- *A_r* = level of diplomatic engagement with regional states
- *S_p* = U.S. political and sanctions pressure
- *W_c, W_r, W_s* = assigned weights (0.4, 0.35, 0.25)

Table 2. Iran's Regional Influence Index (2016–2023)

Year	S_p	A_r	N_c	RPI
2016	4	5	2	3.55
2018	4	6	3	4.15
2020	5	7	4	5.05
2023	6	8	5	5.95

Research Instruments

- Document content analysis: for examining the agreement and reports
- Regional comparative analysis: for comparing reactions of Arab states (based on the following table)
- Indicator weighting models: for assessing outcomes
- Network analysis: for evaluating Iran's role in regional transit networks
- Scenario-based futures studies models: for analyzing long-term consequences of the agreement

Table 3. Axial Coding Results (Level One)

Row	Components	Subcategories
1	China's relations with Arab states	Defining the Middle East as a neighboring region; Increased economic investment in the Middle East; Non-interference in domestic affairs; Increased diplomatic engagement in regional tensions; Scientific–cultural exchanges
2	Opportunities	Economic capacities and China's geoeconomic outlook; Belt and Road Initiative and Iran's position within the 25-year agreement; Strategic and military considerations; Political dimensions; Foreign policy dimensions; Reducing sanctions pressure and geopolitical isolation
3	Negative aspects	Concerns about dependency; Protection of security and territorial integrity; China's interest-based foreign policy behavior; Major discounts for oil and petrochemical exports; China's exploitation of Iran's economic vulnerabilities; Autonomy/security duality; Entrapment/abandonment duality; Debt-trap risks; Access to infrastructural communication data; Sovereignty-related principles; Growing Chinese influence in the Middle East; China's ambition for influence along the Oman Sea and western Indian Ocean
4	Positive aspects	Advancement in national infrastructure; Increase in foreign investment; Expansion of financial, banking, and insurance cooperation; Medium-term reduction of sanctions effects; Enhanced scientific, cultural, tourism, and environmental cooperation; Countering extremism and terrorism; Increased export of Iran's petrochemical products to China
5	Challenges	Sanctions on Iranian oil purchases; U.S. unilateralism toward Iran and China; Possible U.S. support for extremist groups to undermine the agreement; Indirect oil sanctions; Financial system sanctions; Iran's FATF blacklist status; Strong lobbying by Iran's regional rivals; Replacement of Iran with alternative Silk Road routes; Sensitivities of political systems in Iran and China; Regional power imbalance in Southwest Asia; Emergence of new regional actors; Military, intelligence, political, and economic rivalries in the region

Data analysis was carried out in three stages:

Stage One: Geopolitical Analysis

In the first stage, a geopolitical analysis was conducted by mapping the network of regional relations and comparing Iran's role before and after the agreement (using the diagram below).

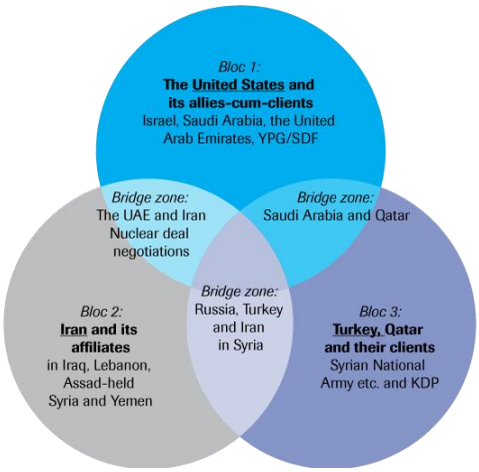

Figure 1. Key regional blocs shaping geopolitical competition in the Middle East

Stage Two: Geoeconomic Analysis (Table of China's Investments in Iran)

This stage focused on:

- Iran's position within the network of BRI transit corridors.

Stage Three: Analysis of Regional Actors' Reactions

This stage was based on:

- A table of Arab states' reactions.
- Comparative analysis of India and the United States.

Validity and Reliability of the Research

To enhance validity, the method of data triangulation was employed; that is, data were collected from three types of sources: official documents, academic research, and thesis data. To increase reliability, coding was repeated in two rounds by the researcher, and conceptual comparison was conducted.

Scope of the Research

- **Subject scope:** Regional implications of the Iran–China cooperation agreement in three domains: geopolitical, geoeconomic, and behavioral.
- **Time scope:** 2016 to 2023 (as the period of peak great-power competition).
- **Spatial scope:** The West Asia region, including Iran, Iraq, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Turkey, and India (as an influential external actor).

In the following table, data extracted from the reviewed books and articles have been open coded. The use of the numbers 1, 2, etc. indicates that a given source refers to the specific code during the coding process, while the number 0 indicates that the code is not mentioned in that text.

Table 4. Summary of Open Coding Results of the Interviews

Row	Code (Concept)	Int 14	Int 13	Int 12	Int 11	Int 10	Int 9	Int 8	Int 7	Int 6	Int 5	Int 4	Int 3	Int 2	Int 1	Total
1	One Belt, One Road	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
2	Scientific–cultural exchanges (Confucius Institute)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
3	Non-interference in internal political affairs	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	6
4	Political aspects	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
5	Economic capacities and China's geoeconomic outlook	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
6	Public diplomacy through language and literature	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
7	Energy aspects	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
8	Political, strategic, and military considerations	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
9	Infrastructure development	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
10	Construction of large desalination plants	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
11	Increased Chinese influence in the Middle East	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
12	Sovereignty/non-subordination rule	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
13	China cutting oil import routes	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	5
14	Increased diplomatic involvement in regional tensions	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	6
15	Airport management and consulting cooperation	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
16	Dependency concerns	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
17	Security and territorial integrity	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
18	Oil storage construction participation	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
19	Interest-based foreign policy behavior	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
20	Major discounts on oil & petrochemicals	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
21	Exploiting Iran's economic vulnerability	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
22	Foreign policy aspects	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

23	Belt and Road and Iran's role	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
24	Security aspects	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	8
25	Terrorism aspects	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
26	Middle East as a neighboring region	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
27	Increased economic investment in Middle East	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	9
28	Autonomy/security duality	0	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	8
29	Entrapment/abandonment duality	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4
30	Debt trap	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	7
31	Access to communications infrastructure data	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
32	China seeking dominance over Oman Sea & western Indian Ocean	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
33	Medium-term reduction in sanctions effects	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
34	Increased scientific, cultural, tourism, & environmental interactions	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
35	Reciprocal government scholarships & academic exchange	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
36	Joint academic research	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
37	Support for knowledge-based companies via joint funds	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	8
38	Progress in commercial sector	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
39	Countering extremism & terrorism	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
40	Political-security cooperation	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
41	Use of trade agreement capacities	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
42	Defense infrastructure & counter-terrorism cooperation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
43	Iran oil purchase sanctions	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	6
44	U.S. unilateralism toward Iran & China	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
45	Possible U.S. support for radical groups	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	5
46	Indirect oil sanctions	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
47	Banking sanctions	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
48	FATF blacklist issue	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
49	Heavy lobbying by Iran's regional rivals	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
50	Saudi Arabia	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	4
51	Israel	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
52	Iran's influence axis toward Europe via Turkey	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
53	Accelerating oil production from main fields	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
54	Military, political, economic competition	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
55	Intelligence wars	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
56	Regional security trends	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
57	China's mediation in Iran–regional relations	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
58	Persian language influence axis	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

59	Islamic cultural influence axis	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
60	Iran's political-military influence among resistance groups	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
61	Pirates (piracy)	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
62	Oil disputes	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
63	U.S. securitization of Iran	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
64	Increase in international sanctions	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
65	Global economic modernization trends	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
66	Southwest Asia power imbalance	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
67	New actors emerging in region	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
68	Regional security trends	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	7
69	Islamist extremists in region	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
70	Formation of unstable coalitions	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
71	Expansion of terrorism	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
72	Increase in intra-regional hub competition	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3
73	Political instability	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
74	Replacing Iran with alternative Silk Road routes	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
75	Iran–China political system sensitivities	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
76	Strong competition of major powers for influence	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
77	U.S. attempt to contain Iran and China	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
78	U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	7
79	U.S. dominance over some regional states	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
80	Support for Persian & Chinese language programs	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
81	Joint technological projects	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
82	Tourism industry cooperation	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
83	Financial, banking, customs, and infrastructure cooperation	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
84	Military experience exchange & joint exercises	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
85	China's support for Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	8
86	Increased Iranian petrochemical exports to China	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
87	Trade agreements status in BRI corridor	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
88	Financial sector	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
89	Increase in foreign investment	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
90	Cooperation in factory construction	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
91	Participation in energy transmission lines	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
92	Expansion of financial, banking, and insurance cooperation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
93	Support for insurance cooperation	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	7

94	Establishment of a joint trading company	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
95	Iran's geopolitical position in the region	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
96	China seeking land connectivity with Europe (North–South Corridor)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
97	Iran–Saudi Arabia negotiations	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
98	Israel–Palestine war	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
99	Complementarity of Iran–China economic structures	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
100	Meeting mutual geopolitical & geoeconomic needs	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
101	Reduction in sanctions pressure & geopolitical isolation	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
102	Technology transfer in aviation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
103	Construction of green and smart buildings	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
104	Technology exchange for major construction projects	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
105	China seeking global market access for western regions	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
106	China expanding influence beyond its borders	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
107	China seeking deterrent power against U.S. energy control	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
108	Maritime security (Hormuz and sensitive waterways)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

As shown in Table 4, an effort was made to extract new key points from related domestic and international studies and articles (theoretical foundations and empirical literature). These points formed 108 initial codes, many of which, although expressed with different terms and formulations, shared the same underlying meaning. Therefore, in Table 4 these codes were merged and presented as the final output of the open-coding stage.

The results of the axial coding of the data are presented in the above tables. Based on the analyses conducted at this stage, it became possible to identify the following points regarding the analysis of the geopolitical impacts of the 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement, with an emphasis on its regional and domestic consequences: given China's relations with Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the implementation of the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Iran and China has a specific outlook.

- There are challenges ahead for the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Iran and China.
- There are negative aspects within the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Iran and China.
- There are opportunities within the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Iran and China.
- There are positive aspects within the Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement between Iran and China.

Table 5. Results of Axial Coding (First Level)

Row	Components	Subcategories
1	China's relations with Arab states	Defining the Middle East as a neighboring region
		Increased economic investment in the Middle East
		Non-interference in the internal political affairs of states
		Increased political diplomacy in Middle Eastern tensions

		Scientific–cultural exchanges
2	Opportunities	Economic capacities and China's geoeconomic outlook
		Belt and Road Initiative and Iran's position within the 25-year agreement
		Strategic and military considerations
		Political dimensions
		Foreign policy dimensions
		Reducing sanctions pressure and geopolitical isolation
3	Negative aspects	Creation of concerns about dependency
		Protection of security and territorial integrity
		China's foreign policy behavior based on its own interests
		Major discounts on the sale of oil and petrochemical products
		China's exploitation of the vulnerability of Iran's economy
		Autonomy/security duality
		Entrapment/abandonment duality
		Debt trap
		Access to communications infrastructure data
		Sovereignty/non-subordination rule
		Increased Chinese influence in the Middle East
		China's pursuit of dominance over the coasts of the Oman Sea and the western Indian Ocean
4	Positive aspects	Increase in foreign investment
		Expansion of financial, banking, and insurance cooperation
		Medium-term reduction of sanctions effects
		Increased scientific, cultural, tourism, and environmental interactions
		Countering extremism and terrorism
		Increased exports of Iranian petrochemical products to China
5	Challenges	Sanctions on Iranian oil purchases
		U.S. unilateralism toward Iran and China
		Possible U.S. support for extremist and radical groups to undermine the agreement
		Indirect oil sanctions
		Banking sanctions
		Iran's presence on the FATF blacklist
		Intense lobbying by Iran's regional rivals
		Replacement of Iran with alternative routes for the Silk Road
		Sensitivities and concerns of the political systems ruling Iran and China
		Power imbalance in Southwest Asia
		Emergence and growth of new regional actors
		Military, intelligence, political, and economic competition in the region

To improve the process of classifying codes into categories, the tool of theoretical comparison proposed by Strauss and Corbin was employed. On this basis, 81 final extracted codes were grouped into 43 concepts. As can be seen in Figure 2, the theoretical model of "Geopolitical Impacts of the 25-Year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement" is presented according to the dimensions of the paradigmatic model.

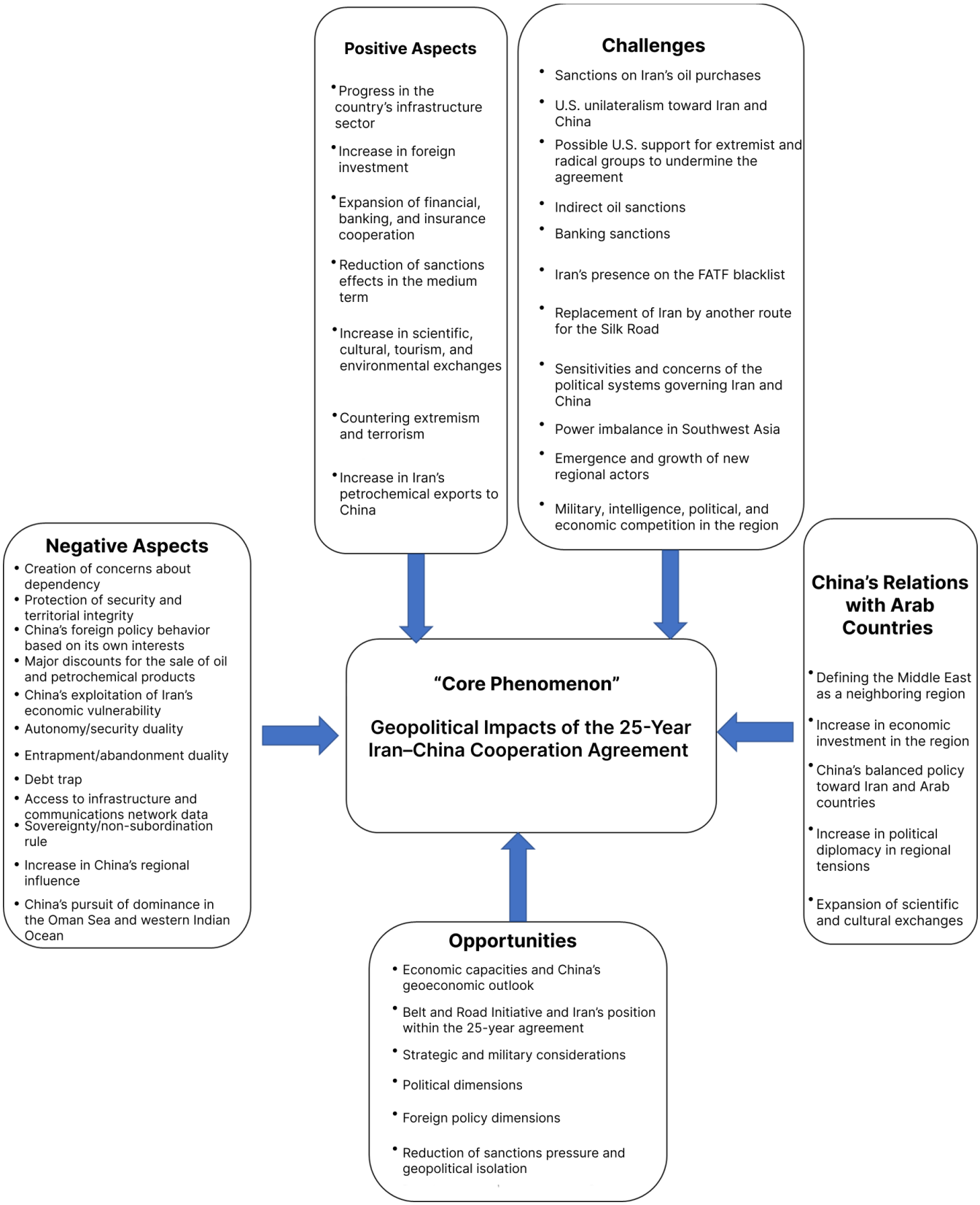

Figure 2. Theoretical model of "Geopolitical Impacts of the 25-Year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement"

Conclusion

The 25-year Iran–China Cooperation Agreement is shaped within a landscape of geopolitical shifts and great-power competition; therefore, its effects are not confined to a single domain but extend across multiple layers, influencing the regional balance of power, Iran's geoeconomic position, and its relations with regional and extra-regional actors. From the perspective of its impact on the balance of power and the regional order of West Asia, the agreement has the capacity to strengthen Iran's role in the emerging regional structure, as strategic convergence with China provides Tehran with a form of strategic backing and increases its ability to balance economic and political pressures. However, because China simultaneously pursues a balancing policy toward both Iran and the Arab states, the effect of the agreement on shifting regional power dynamics is neither absolute nor unilateral; instead, it largely depends on Iran's performance and initiative. Consequently, the agreement may enhance Iran's position, but only if Iran is able to use it as a lever to improve its regional standing and relations.

From a geoeconomic and geostrategic perspective, the agreement offers significant opportunities. Iran's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative and its inclusion in east–west and north–south transit corridors enhance the possibility of revitalizing Iran's geoeconomic role, while energy linkages with China can provide greater stability for Iran's energy exports. Additionally, Chinese infrastructure investments may strengthen Iran's domestic capacities and reduce the impact of sanctions. However, these potential benefits are conditional: Iran must enhance its domestic infrastructure, create stability in economic policymaking, and translate the agreement from a policy document into actual operational projects. Conversely, the agreement may also generate challenges such as unilateral dependency, corridor competition with regional countries, and constraints arising from China's reluctance to engage in the security complexities of the Persian Gulf. Therefore, the geoeconomic and geostrategic pathways of the agreement contain both enabling and limiting factors.

In the context of Iran's relations with regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey, the agreement creates dual implications. On the one hand, China's balanced approach prevents Arab states from viewing the agreement as an absolute threat, allowing Iran to strengthen its geoeconomic position without triggering heightened security sensitivities. On the other hand, this same balance implies that Iran cannot expect unilateral political or security support from China. In addition, Turkey's transit corridor competition with Iran and India's concerns regarding deepening Iran–China cooperation may generate new layers of regional rivalry and complexity. Overall, while the agreement creates opportunities for expanding economic networks and reducing regional pressure, its success depends on Iran's active foreign policy and multilateral engagement with its neighbors.

Thus, a unified response to the study's three main research questions shows that the 25-year agreement can elevate Iran's geopolitical standing, open new geoeconomic pathways, and shape Iran's regional and extra-regional relations in ways that offer new capacities for Iranian foreign policy. However, realizing these capacities depends entirely on Iran's will, strategic planning, and operational capability in executing projects, managing great-power competition, and ensuring domestic economic stability. If implemented intelligently and purposefully, the agreement can become a turning point in Iran's empowerment within the emerging West Asian order. If it remains at the political or declaratory level, not only will opportunities fail to materialize, but it may also generate new economic and geopolitical constraints. The final conclusion is that this agreement has the potential to enhance Iran's power, but actualizing these benefits depends on Iran's performance.

Practical Recommendations

1. Transforming the agreement from a political document into an operational program

• Develop a timeline with measurable progress indicators

• Prioritize practical sectors such as energy, transportation, and technology

2. Strengthening the country's key infrastructure

• Expand ports, transit railroads, and energy transmission lines

• Reform regulations to attract foreign investment

3. Preventing economic dependency on China

• Diversify trade partners

• Negotiate balanced contracts based on national interests

4. Activating regional diplomacy

• Improve relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey to reduce corridor competition

• Participate in regional joint projects to enhance integration

5. Strategic use of U.S.–China rivalry

• Leverage great-power competition for increased bargaining power

• Maintain strategic independence and avoid falling into exclusive geopolitical blocs

6. Oversight and transparency

• Publish annual progress reports on the agreement

• Involve universities and think tanks in monitoring and evaluating outcomes

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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