



RESEARCH PAPER

Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Relations: Implications for the Region

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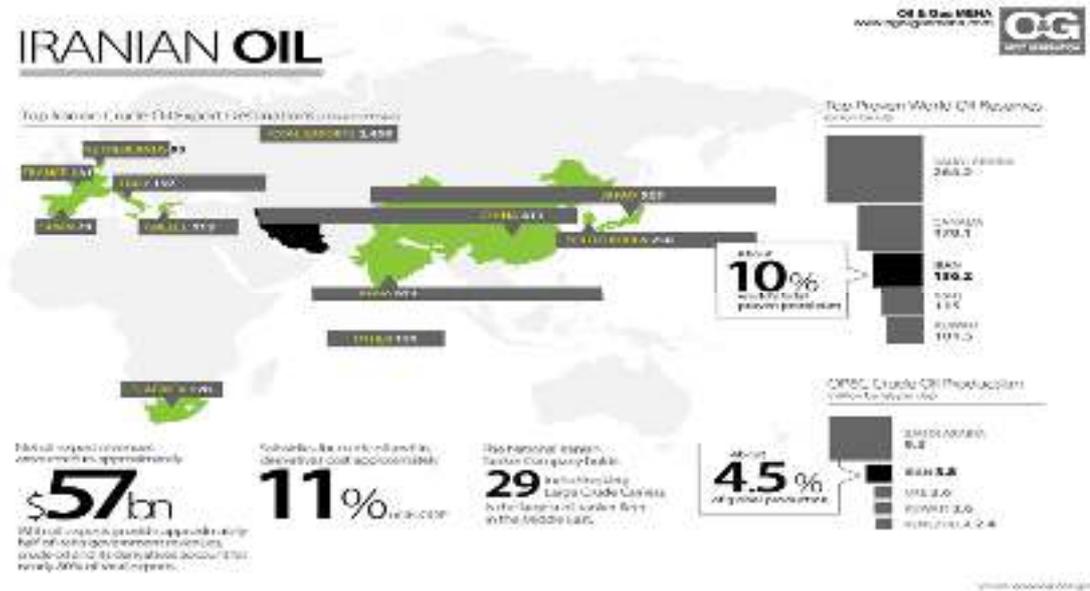
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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: February 07, 2022 Accepted: May 10, 2022 Online: May 12, 2022	The main objective of this paper is to analyze the developing Sino-Iranian comprehensive strategic relations. An attempt has been made to rationally forecast the implications of this growing partnership on the regional actors, particularly India. Recent developments in South Asia and Middle East have attracted the attention of global academia. The rise of China as a major regional economic power and her pursuits in building new alliances in the South Asia and Middle East have started changing the power dynamics in the region. The developments in Sino-Iran bilateral relations have alarmed many regional and global actors. The article is mainly based on secondary sources and arguments have been developed by juxtaposing the information collected through books, newspapers and journal articles with personal reflections. It is found that Sino-Iran relations have great potential to grow in future, whereas China may emerge as a new contestant and a decisive factor in the middle eastern future politics.
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Introduction

After the United States of America's (US) sanctions against China and Iran, the two countries have decided to take their relationship to a new level and have recently signed a military and investment-related agreement (Reuters, 2021). China is using soft power to increase its influence in different parts of the world.

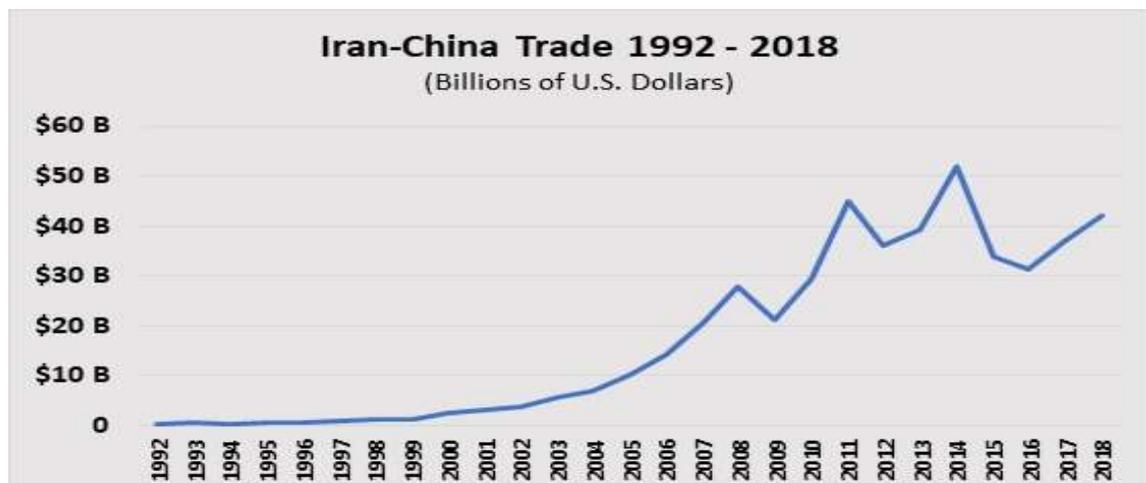
The growing relationship between China, Iran, the Afghan Taliban, and Pakistan is also a worrisome situation for India as it will hurt India's interests in the region. Moreover, after the removal of India from the Chahbahar port project, as India did not proceed with this agreement due to US pressure, China and Iran have come closer to each other. China is also developing economic and trade relations with other Arab and Middle Eastern countries. Especially after the Arab Spring, China has focused to strengthen her relations with Arab, Middle Eastern, and African countries. Chinese ability to balance Shia-Sunni sectarian divide in the region is yet to be tested. So far, China has effectively managed to engage the Middle Eastern countries in the BRI project. Middle Eastern countries are looking for investment, better economic projects, and economic development, whereas, China is in dire need of an uninterrupted supply of oil and gas, from this region, to gear up its developmental projects in the region and Industrialization at home. All this has led to engagements between China and the Middle East at various levels. For instance China has ensured its military presence in the Middle East. It has been conducting military exercises with Asian, Arab, and African countries.



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Literature Review

China and Iran came close to each other during the past few years with a new zeal. The major causes of this growing intimacy between the two states is driven by Chinese ambition to increase its influence in the region and Iran’s aspiration to avoid its isolation, in global politics, due to US sanctions against it. President Xi Jinping of China paid a visit to Iran in January 2016. This visit proved to be the beginning of a new era in the relations between the two states. Just before the US re-imposed sanctions on Tehran in 2018, China and Iran penned down the objective of creating exchange relations worth 600 dollars (Hincks, 2020). According to this new agreement, China would contribute 400 billion dollars to cover certain trade and military matters and issues. In return, as a part of this deal, for the upcoming next 25 years, Iran would be bound to provide its oil on regular basis at extreme discounts making it cheap for China. Iran would also get contribution from China in many sectors ranging maritime, defense, telecommunication, infrastructure, petrochemicals, energy, railways, and ports, to banking. It would also enable the Iranian state to have control over cyberspace with the help of China (CEIAS, 2020).



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This silent conscripting of Sino-Iran economic and security collaboration would pave the way for emasculating America's efforts to isolate Iran from the rest of the world, for its nuclear spirits and military determinations, with the help of billions of dollars of Chinese investments in energy and other sectors. This collaborative effort consists of an agreement composed of 18, detailed, pages (Fassihi & Myers, 2020).



The proposed high-speed rail line would be complementary to the existing railway network in the region

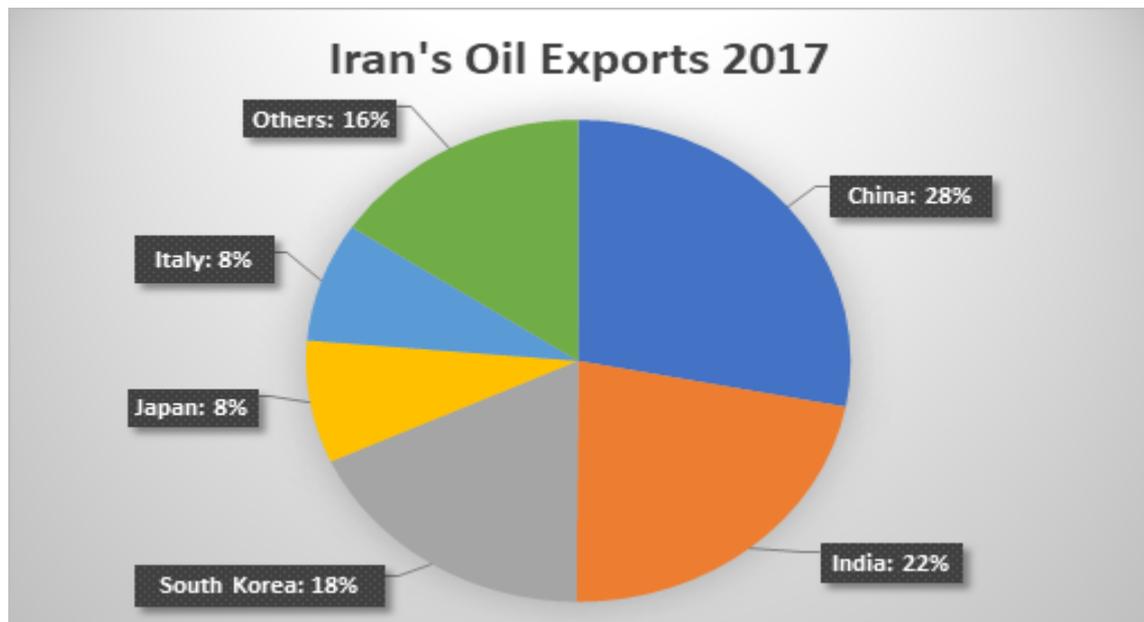
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According to this agreement, China would also help Iran in building a framework for a 5G telecommunication network. The growing Sino-Iranian collaboration alarmed the US. The US response could be seen in prevention of Huawei, which is a Chinese telecommunication company, to build a 5G network in America. There was a criminal case penned against the chief financial officer of the company, Mr. MengWanzhou, for not following the US sanctions which were imposed on Iran. Despite all this, China has now become more confident, as now it has developed the ability to stand strong in front of the United States, and to withstand any sort of penalties that it might face by supporting Iran, of which the inclusion of 5G development in the China-Iran deal is the main indication. Moreover, the deal also includes military cooperation; as it would allow China ensure its military presence in the region. It is evident, from the historical record, that China kept on making efforts to tie militaries of the two, together (CEIAS, 2020). China has shown its readiness for joint military drills, training, research, exercises, the development of weapons, and the sharing of intelligence to take a stand against "the lopsided battle with terrorism, drug and human trafficking and cross-border crimes" (Fassihi & Myers, 2020). In the developing scenario China has emerged as an alternative option against the support of the West for several countries. Thus, China has now been seen as a very powerful substitute, for the US and Europe, as an investment and trade partner for Iran (CEIAS, 2020).



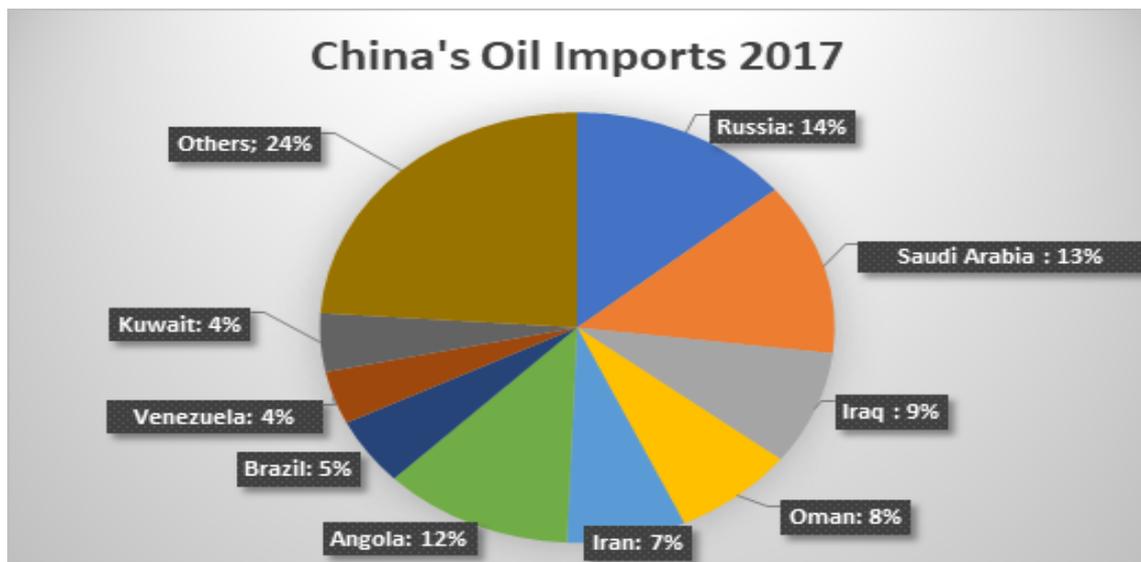
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It is quite evident that China is intending to enhance its influence in Africa and East Asia via Iran. China is emerging as a challenger to the US interests in these regions. Chinese growing influence in the Middle East might make this region a new battleground of global political economy. In this context, the aforementioned agreement is very important. China could be a life saver for sanctions-hit Iran.



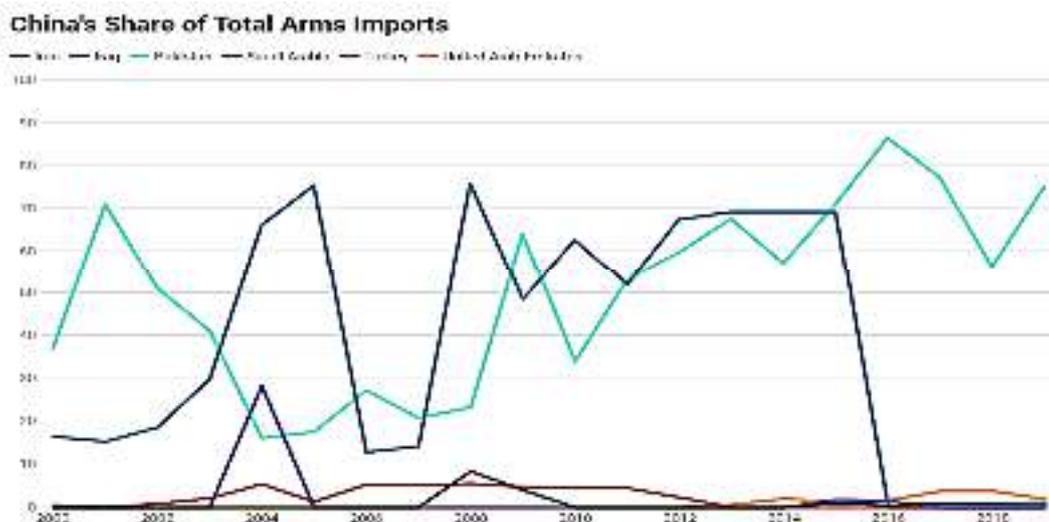
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Iran's isolation, in the post US sanctions scenario, has compelled it to ambitiously move towards China. As Beijing is a member of P5 of the UN, Iran's strategic ties with China can be used as a bargaining joystick for creating an opportunity of future table-talks with the West. Iran's closeness with China depicts that the "Look East" policy is being adopted by Iran to balance the US influence in the region. Iran's vulnerability, due to the US sanctions, has created a great opportunity for China, also, to meet its energy needs for a rapid industrial growth. More than half of China's energy demands are fulfilled by the Persian Gulf. Sino-Iran cooperation would allow it to get the official freedom of navigation through the Gulf region which would give China great geo-strategic leverage in the region.



Source: <https://iranprimer.usip.org>

The agreement between Beijing and Tehran would prove as a political game-changer for the region, shifting balance of power in Chinese favor. This deal would permit China to become an influential actor in one of the most desirable regions of the world. China has correctly perceived the potential of Iran as a major regional player despite the fact that Iran's impact in the recent past has been compromised due to other regional developments (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2020).

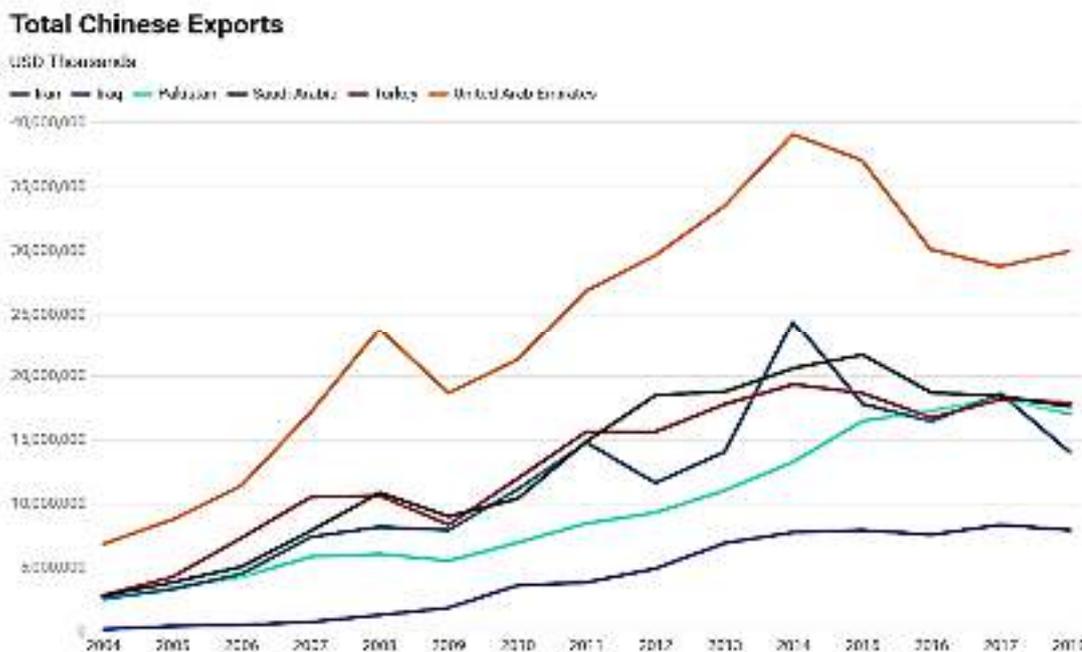


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Challenges for China to Balance Anti-Iranian Partners in the Region

The most crucial challenge for China in the Middle Eastern region is the development of regional politics on sectarian lines. The political-cum-sectarian differences between Salafi Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and its allies, and Shia Iran, and its allies, have turned out into many proxy wars in the region. In such a scenario engaging all regional players remained the focus of Chinese policy in the Middle East. The President of China paid a series of visits to almost all the countries of the Middle East in January by taking stays in Tehran, Egypt, and the KSA which are, right now, the three main corners of the triangular power of the region.

These visits proved very productive for China. Chinese foreign minister termed these developments as "reaching a new height of relations" in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran gave surety for extending economic cooperation with China through its economic initiatives to link China's trade, more easily, to the wider Eurasia, New Silk Road Economic Belt, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (The Belt and Road Initiative-One Belt One Road-OBOR) and the Maritime Economic Belt (Herlevi, 2016). Chinese ambitions in the Middle Eastern region have made this region the center of global politics (Fatima et.al, 2017).



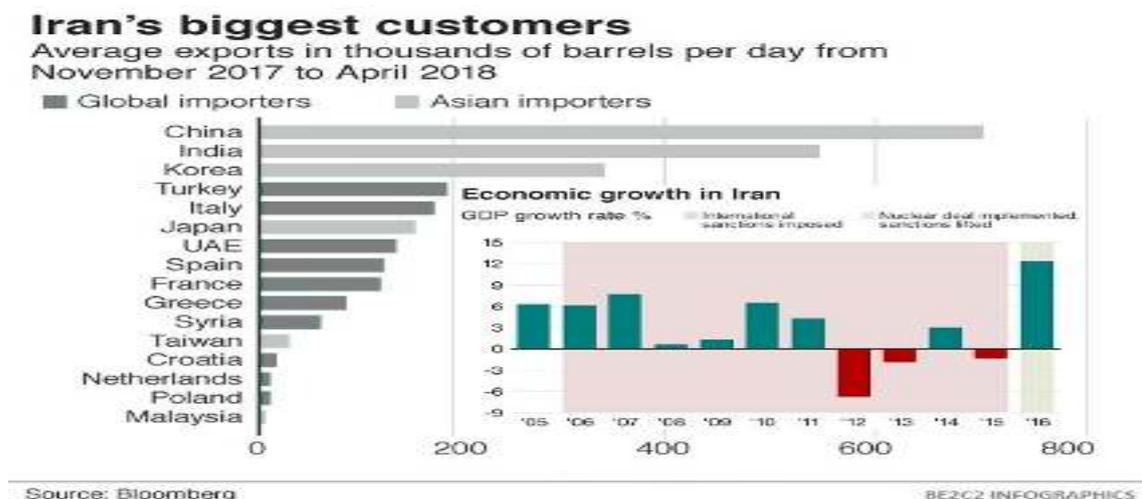
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In such a scenario China has to avoid the regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It has to build a flexible and friendly policy of engaging both. The presence of China in the Middle East would become a great opportunity for neutralizing the Saudi-Iran conflict. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could be pivotal in this context. BRI is a huge project for China's road to economic development, while connecting the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe. It would also allow China to have easy access to the Persian Gulf's energy resources. Mostly, the Gulf and the Levant nations do not interact economically because they are divided into pro-Iranian and pro-Saudi camps. Apparently this division is the greatest challenge for Chinese interest in the region. Efficient execution of BRI project needs various strategies including pressurizing, negotiations, and mediations to keep the temperature low between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Lidarev, 2017).

China's balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia would be much more difficult to sustain in the future. Presence of the US in the region and its long term cordial relations with KSA also complicates the situation further. America would do its best to sabotage BRI by exploiting the sectarian divide in the region. In such a situation China would need to keep both Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in a peace process by maintaining the policy of equidistance, to solve the confusion grown by its policies, and to manage the crisis generated due to competition between the two regional rivals (Lidarev, 2017).

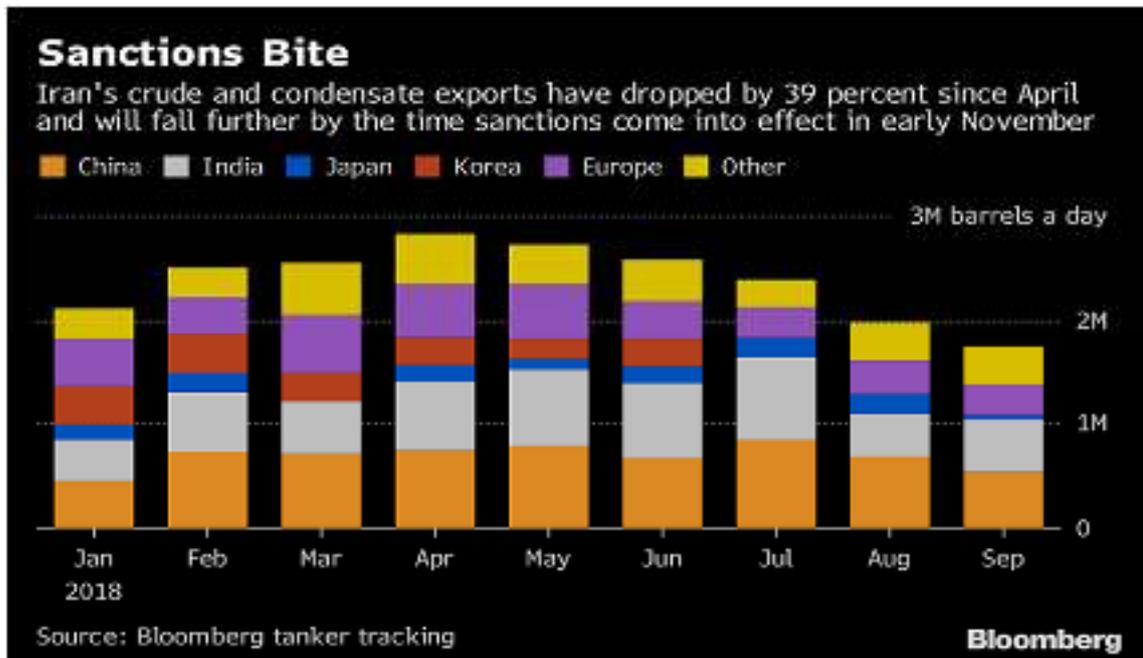
US's Sanctions on Iran vis-a-vis Sino-Iran Strategic Partnership

Chinese encroachment in the Middle East has alarmed the US. The later was particularly concerned due to phenomenal Iran-China-Russia joint maritime exercise in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. The geo-strategic realities of the region have changed since the 2003 U.S. attack on Iraq. These changes, especially in the context of the Arab Spring, have given a chance to regional actors like Iran to reconsider its role in the regional politics. Meanwhile, since Xi Jinping rise to the position of Chairman of Communist Party of China in 2012, the Chinese government has ambitiously aspired to make China a politically influential nation and to assume a more dynamic role in different regions. This aspiration showed itself in presenting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which featured the essential significance of the Middle East. While, the U.S President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the atomic arrangement with Iran in 2018, and the resulting presentation of the greatest pressing factor strategy, was the last exertion by the U.S. government to end Iran's developing impact in the area. Albeit this approach has hit Iran's economy hard, it has not had the option to change the country's eager territorial and military arrangements. This strategic BRI's collaboration between Iran and China will minimize the US's role in the Middle East and now China is eager to play actively in the region, instead (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2020). Since 2014, the People's Liberation Army Navy has taken an interest in military activities with Iran. In December 2019, the Chinese rocket destroyer, the Xining, joined the maritime exercise in the Gulf of Oman in joint naval exercise with Russian and Iranian naval forces. A arising China-Iran military organization will be of incredible premium to Washington, as indicated by reports from the spilled archive it could include joint preparing and activities, examination and weapons improvement, and knowledge sharing on psychological oppression, human and medication dealing, and other cross-line wrongdoing (CEIAS, 2020). The *Times* reported the US stance on these developments alleging China as tabulating its own goal of maintaining peace and balance by ignoring sanctions imposed by the US and by indulging in trading with Iran (Hincks, 2020).



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alliances between the Taliban, Pakistan, and Iran is a matter of serious concern for India especially when it is backed by China, the hostile neighbor of India (Bhatia, 2020).



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Iran withdrew India from the rail project of Chabahar. This was a major trauma for the geostrategic front for India. Iran surprised the world by its decision regarding this project where, due to US sanctions, its economy kept on falling. The choice has been made when Tehran and Beijing have nearly agreed on a drawn-out essential organization worth \$400 billion that both the nations have been working on since 2016. Regardless of U.S. sanctions on Iran, New Delhi figure out how to get an exclusion for Chabahar from Washington. The U.S. has strengthened its greatest pressing factor crusade on Tehran. A piece of which was to repudiate waivers on Iranian oil imports to nations like India. New Delhi surrender to U.S pressure and focused its oil imports from Tehran. If there should arise an occurrence of the Chabahar rail project, notwithstanding exception, Washington never permitted New Delhi to go on with the undertaking. Thus, the U.S. tension on New Deli may have caused the postponement that got India kicked out from the Chabahar rail project. Numerous Indians trust New Delhi can rejoin the task. Indeed, if Tehran permits. In any case, it appears to be profoundly improbable as Tehran has guaranteed Beijing a significant job at Chabahar port. India is backed by the US which is a global rival of China that's why China would never like India to utilize Chabahar for geostrategic and economic matters. India should make it clear in short that exclusion from Chahbahar and the rail project means vice versa(Ali, 2020).

India had to agree upon the US sanctions as it has the full support of the US that's why the relationship between India and Iran damped gradually regarding trade. In this regard the day by day increasing US Indo economic and strategic relations and the visit of Mr. Trump to India appear to be the last. Chinas interference in Iran will have an ever-lasting impact on India's ties with Iran, Afghanistan, and other Nations of central Asia.

Conclusion

The relationship between China and Iran has strengthened due to several reasons. Iran, a victim of US sanctions, desires to improve her economic condition whereas the US

and China are engaged in a trade war; therefore, Iran and China have signed an agreement related to investment and trade. China wants to enhance its influence in the Middle East and wants to challenge the position of the US; hence it has also signed trade-related agreements with the Middle Eastern countries. China desires a non-stop flow of oil from Middle Eastern countries and tried to engage them with her BRI project. On the other hand, the Middle Eastern countries aspire to improve their economic conditions and want foreign investment; therefore, they have found China as the best option to achieve their goals.

The US has grown concerned about China's growing influence not only in the region but also in the world. The US fears that the economic development projects by China in other countries especially the development of ports may eventually result in the military presence of China in these ports. The exclusion of India from the Chahbahar port agreement and the US sanctions on Iran have only brought China and Iran closer to each other. Iran needs to improve its economy and acquire advanced technology which China can provide whereas, on the other hand, China needs to have a strong foothold in the region and import oil, which Iran can provide to China. Therefore, both countries have strengthened their relationship to achieve their goals. The growing relationship between China and Iran will hurt India's ambitions for regional hegemony as India will not only lose access to Chahbahar port but also weaken her relationship with Iran. China is also replacing the US as the biggest investor in several parts of the world and maintaining a maritime military presence as well to secure its trade lines. It can be suggested that if the US wants to maintain her global power, then the US needs to revise her policy regarding the Middle Eastern countries especially towards Iran as sanctions and military interventions by the US will only push these countries away from the US and invite other powers to fill in the gap. This situation also manifests that economic development-related projects bring the countries together and create economic stability in the region.

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