

Is China Changing the Rules of Conflict?

(Translated)

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In a world where wars are no longer always declared on media platforms, nor decided solely by the roar of warplanes, a different kind of conflict is taking shape; a silent, transnational conflict, extending beyond geography, where the balance of power is being reshaped, and the limits of influence among major powers are being tested.

In this developing landscape, Iran appears not merely as a country facing sanctions or military threats, but as a player attempting to redefine its position through unconventional means, capitalizing on the convergence of interests with China, and the transformation of technology into a readily available commodity in an open global market. America views this rapprochement with suspicion, as the question transcends the mere agreement here or deal there, reaching a deeper core: Are we witnessing the beginning of a new international order in which monopolies of power are dismantled, or merely a redistribution of power through more complex and opaque means?

Since 2016, when the idea of a strategic partnership between Tehran and Beijing was first proposed, the extent to which this relationship could develop has remained unclear. However, the signing of a long-term cooperation agreement in 2021 laid the foundation for an alliance that transcends economics and extends into geopolitics. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, is not merely seeking a trade route, but also strategic footholds, and Iran—with its geographic location and resources—represents a cornerstone of this project.

This agreement, for those unfamiliar with it, was first conceived in 2016 during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Tehran and his meeting with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, where the idea of a long-term strategic partnership between the two countries was proposed. In 2019, Iran initially stated that it was merely an idea and not a final agreement. Later, it evolved until its official signing on April 27, 2021, under the name "Strategic Cooperation Agreement," with a duration of 25 years (Al Jazeera Net, April 27, 2021). This agreement served as a general framework, not a detailed treaty with all its specific provisions. The agreement was not renewed in 2023, but cooperation was strengthened and several subsidiary agreements were signed during reciprocal visits (Al-Arabiya, February 14, 2023). It is not entirely secret; it was officially announced, its duration of 25 years was known, and it includes economic, political, and possibly security cooperation. However, it is not entirely transparent, as many of its details have not been officially published. Therefore, it is sometimes described as vague or semi-secret. Among the leaked details are the following:

1. Oil for Investment – "The Core of the Deal": China will receive Iranian oil at discounted and fixed prices for a long period, potentially up to 25 years, in exchange for investments in energy, infrastructure, ports, railways, and the construction of Iranian oil storage facilities in China and elsewhere.

2. Connecting Iran to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Developing ports and railways linking Asia to Europe via Iran, thus transforming Iran from an isolated country into a global trade corridor.

3. Military and Security Cooperation: Joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and the development of surveillance technologies.

4. Technology and Communications: Allowing Chinese companies like Huawei to enter the market, developing 5G networks, and conducting digital surveillance. As part of this cooperation, Iran acquired a Chinese commercial dual-satellite in 2024 through a private Chinese company, purchasing access to it or its future use. The satellite, known as TEE-01B (Earth Eye 1), is not officially owned by Iran but by a private Chinese company, and Iran purchased its services or data. Control, or at least some of its operation, is conducted from

ground stations outside Iran, exclusively in China. The details of this satellite's operation remain unclear, but it is alleged that it was used in the war to monitor military bases and support military operations, according to Western claims (Reuters, April 15, 2026).

Iran saw several advantages in this agreement, enabling it to balance its relations with the US and China, especially after the shift in US policy towards it, the assassination of its leaders, the withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, and other developments. Among Iran's primary objectives in this agreement were: circumventing US sanctions, as China would provide funding, trade, and political cover; the rise of an Iranian-Chinese axis, which could potentially extend to include Russia in the future; and an indirect threat to energy routes, as China would gain a stronger presence in the Gulf, and Iran would gain greater confidence in managing crises such as those related to the Strait of Hormuz.

However, Iran was apprehensive about granting China excessively long-term concessions in the absence of transparency, fearing the risk of falling into a debt trap. China itself was also cautious, as it did not turn this agreement into a full reality, and there was a slowdown in implementation due to the American sanctions on Iran, and investments did not reach the volume of \$400 billion as rumored.

It cannot be said that the war was solely a result of this agreement, but with its outbreak and repercussions, the agreement became a target of pressure, perhaps even an attempt to push Iran to reduce or outright cancel it, while maintaining other objectives.

Therefore, it seems that one of the unstated goals of any American escalation, or pressure, is not only to modify Iran's behavior, but also to reduce or even eliminate its ability to use this leverage. Controlling maritime routes, or neutralizing those who threaten them, has remained at the heart of Washington's strategic doctrine for decades, and any regional power capable of disrupting this flow is viewed as a destabilizing factor that must be contained, if not dismantled.

However, the paradox lies in the fact that attempting to strip Iran of this capability might push it to cling to it even more tightly, or to develop unconventional tools to compensate for it, whether through regional proxies or by employing modern technology, including space and surveillance. Here, the conflict transforms from a confrontation over geography to a struggle over tools, and from a dispute over waterways to a competition over who possesses the ability to disrupt or protect them. Therefore, America's eagerness to regain control at this sensitive juncture reflects not only its desire to contain Iran, but also reveals a deeper struggle: a battle over who sets the rules of the game globally and who has the power to close those routes when necessary. At this level, the crisis is no longer merely a regional dispute, but part of a larger conflict over the very nature of the international order.

However, the final outcome of the negotiations will determine whether America has succeeded in transforming Iran into a state subordinate to the US rather than a satellite state in the orbit of US influence, or whether Iran is attempting to avoid becoming a dependent state and is striving to become an independent state, benefiting from the agreement with China. This is contingent on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remaining in power; if America manages to replace it, it may have succeeded in transforming Iran into a subordinate vassal state.

Noticeably, all these land, sea, and air routes lie within Muslim countries. Should Allah (swt) grant the establishment of a Khilafah (Caliphate), these geographical and strategic factors will represent immense power. However, the activation of these capabilities remains contingent upon the existence of a political entity capable of harnessing them within a comprehensive vision, embodied in the emergence of the Khilafah, and redirecting resources towards achieving stability and justice.

Therefore, restoring influence on the international stage necessitates organized political and intellectual action aimed at rebuilding power on clear foundations, resuming the Islamic way of life, and enabling the Islamic Ummah to leverage its position and resources within a civilizational project capable of influencing the global balance of power.