

Theoretical Foundations and Requirements for Implementing the Look to the East Strategy in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the paragraph beginning “In this regard, ‘Look to the East’ is a multidimensional concept for Iran,” the three dimensions—ideological-cultural, economic-commercial, and political-security—are useful, but they remain descriptive rather than theoretically integrated. The authors should develop a conceptual model showing how these dimensions interact. For example, does the ideological dimension merely justify the economic dimension, or does it independently shape strategic choice? Without clarifying causal relationships among the dimensions, the framework risks becoming classificatory rather than explanatory.

In the paragraph discussing the “25-year cooperation document between Iran and China,” the article should distinguish carefully between signed strategic documents, binding treaties, memoranda of understanding, framework agreements, and implemented projects. The phrase “the signing of the 25-year cooperation document” is used as evidence of a strategic turn, but the article does not sufficiently assess the implementation gap between symbolic diplomatic documents and actual investment, trade, infrastructure delivery, or technology transfer. A revised version should separate rhetorical alignment from measurable economic outcomes.

The paragraph posing the question “is ‘Look to the East’ merely a temporary and tactical reaction to Western pressures, or is it a strategic and long-term decision” is one of the strongest parts of the Introduction, but the rest of the article does not consistently return to this core analytical distinction. The authors should convert this question into an explicit research question and then align the historical review, trade analysis, scenario analysis, and conclusion around it. At present, the manuscript alternates between treating Look to the East as reactive, pragmatic, ideological, and strategic without clearly testing which interpretation is most persuasive.

In Section 2-1, the paragraph stating that “the factors within Iran that influence the formation of ‘Look to the East’ are numerous” identifies ideological beliefs, economic needs, institutional plurality, and public opinion, but it does not rank or weigh these factors. For a more scientific analysis, the authors should clarify whether these factors are treated as independent variables, intervening variables, or contextual conditions. The article would benefit from a table or analytical matrix showing how each domestic factor affects policy formation, policy persistence, and policy implementation.

In Section 3-1-1, the article introduces several quantitative claims about China’s GDP, trade share, and infrastructure financing, but the methodology for selecting these data is not explained. For example, the sentence “China’s gross domestic product reached USD 17.9 trillion in 2023” should specify whether the figure is nominal GDP or PPP-adjusted GDP. Similarly, claims about China’s share of global trade should define whether they refer to exports, imports, total merchandise trade, or goods and services. Greater statistical precision is necessary for a scientific article.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In Section 2-1, the paragraph on “parallel and multiple institutions in Iran’s foreign policy structure” is important but underdeveloped. The article mentions the Supreme National Security Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Parliament, and military-security institutions, yet it does not explain how institutional fragmentation affects the China policy specifically. The authors should provide concrete examples, such as differences between diplomatic, parliamentary, executive, security, or economic actors regarding the 25-year agreement, sanctions circumvention, SCO membership, or infrastructure cooperation. Without such examples, the institutional argument remains abstract.

In the paragraph stating that “some people and elites view cooperation with the East as a way to reduce the economic pressure of sanctions,” the article introduces public opinion but does not provide empirical evidence for this claim. If public opinion is part of the causal explanation, the manuscript should cite surveys, media discourse analyses, parliamentary debates, elite interviews, or content analysis of public reactions. Otherwise, this paragraph should be reframed more cautiously as a possible perception rather than a demonstrated social tendency.

In Section 2-2, the paragraph beginning “The tense environment of the Middle East and geopolitical rivalries involving major international actors” would benefit from stronger theoretical anchoring. The argument clearly draws on threat perception and external balancing, but the manuscript does not explicitly connect it to realist theory, neoclassical realism, or balance-of-threat theory. Since the article later refers to balance of power, the authors should integrate these theoretical concepts earlier and use them consistently across the manuscript.

In Section 2-3, the paragraph stating that “after the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, a new wave of sanctions... imposed unprecedented pressure on the Iranian economy” is central to the article’s argument. However, the authors should specify which sanctions mechanisms are most relevant to the China orientation: oil export restrictions, banking sanctions, secondary sanctions, shipping insurance restrictions, SWIFT limitations, technology bans, or investment constraints. This would help demonstrate precisely how sanctions redirected Iran’s trade and diplomatic options toward China and Russia.

In the paragraph stating that “sanctions have also been an opportunity for Eastern partners,” the article raises a crucial point about asymmetrical bargaining, but the claim requires further development. The authors should explain how sanctions alter the negotiation structure: reduced outside options, discounted oil sales, delayed payments, barter arrangements, currency constraints, and weaker legal enforceability. This paragraph could become one of the article’s strongest analytical contributions if it were linked to bargaining theory or asymmetric interdependence.

In Section 2-4, the claim that “Iran can act as a geostrategic bridge” is repeated in different forms throughout the article, but the manuscript should avoid assuming that geography automatically translates into geopolitical advantage. Transit potential depends on infrastructure quality, sanctions exposure, political risk, customs efficiency, port capacity, railway connectivity, insurance access, and regional stability. The authors should distinguish between latent geopolitical capacity and realized geoeconomic advantage.

In Section 2-5, the discussion of “debt trap” concerns should be treated more cautiously and analytically. The paragraph currently states that dependence on China “may... lead to a kind of ‘debt trap’ or economic domination,” but the article does not assess whether Iran’s case structurally resembles countries often discussed in the debt-trap literature. Since Iran’s cooperation with China is shaped more by sanctions, oil exports, barter, and infrastructure constraints than conventional sovereign borrowing alone, the authors should either substantiate the applicability of the debt-trap concept or replace it with a more precise concept such as asymmetric dependence, creditor leverage, or strategic vulnerability.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.