

## Iran-China partnership: An opportunity

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On January 24, 2016, the breaking news was that “Iran, China agree \$600 billion trade deal after sanctions lifted”. Tehran and Beijing agreed to expand multidimensional ties and increase bilateral trade more than tenfold in the next decade, during a visit to Iran by Chinese President Xi Jinping. It is a significant development that Iran and China have agreed on forming strategic relations as reflected in a 25 year comprehensive document. Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Iran would never forget Chinese cooperation during the sanctions and he called for closer economic and security ties with China.

Therefore, the two countries signed 17 accords including agreements on cooperation in nuclear energy and a revival of the ancient Silk Road trade route, known in China as One Belt, One Road. Obviously, Tehran and Beijing are committed to strengthen their multidimensional relations.

Iran emerged from years of economic isolation early this month when the United Nations’ nuclear supervisory body ruled in favor of Iran that it had restricted its nuclear program, clearing the way for the lifting of United Nations, United States, and European Union sanctions.

Therefore, Chinese President’s visit to Tehran resulting in historic agreements for increase in bilateral trade is a momentous sign not only for Iran and China but also for the whole region with particular emphasis on enormous trade and economic opportunities for Pakistan.

The lifting of economic sanctions from Iran provides trade opportunities for regional countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Russia, and Central Asian Countries particularly, Tajikistan. The trade activity will generate billions of dollars not only for oil rich Iran but also for the countries having close economic relations with Iran. The significance of the Iran nuclear deal for the world and the region are easy to understand. However, it seems to be that only the Chinese leadership has the vision and ability to avail this vital opportunity. It was noteworthy that even President Barack Obama said that “This deal offers an opportunity to move in a new direction, we should seize it”.

However, the beginning of an appropriate economic relation is not possible in near future due to the decades of hostility between United States and Iran.

History is being created in Pakistan’s neighborhood. Iran and China are strengthening their multidimensional partnership to unprecedented echelon. Where does Pakistan stand in all of this? Pakistan has precisely supported the Iran nuclear deal and China is Pakistan’s closest ally. Last year, the announcement of the initiation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project is a milestone in strengthening bilateral relations and regional trade.

There is also beginning of a new chapter in Pak-Russia relations. The most explicit sign of the new chapter in the rising relationship between Pakistan and Russia is the signing of the agreement between the

Russian state-owned corporation and Pakistan to build a pipeline for Pakistan. Iran and Russia are already close partners in the region. Presently, China-Russia relations are best ever. Therefore, it is time for China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and Central Asian Countries such as Tajikistan to work together for enhancement of regional trade and economic growth.

Interestingly, Pakistan offers geographical corridor between China and Iran. Therefore, Pakistan is in a position to facilitate the trade and economic activity by providing a safe land route to China and Iran. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project has become more vital after latest trade accords between Iran and China. These are new opportunities of trade, and industrial growth for Pakistan.

Recently, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Army Chief General Raheel Sharif visited both Riyadh and Tehran in a bid to ease Saudi-Iran standoff. This fact is recognized worldwide that all Muslim countries including the oil rich countries look toward Pakistan in crucial moments.

Pakistan's diplomatic initiative to end Iran-Saudi confrontation had generated wider goodwill for Pakistan.

It must be understood that the objective of the foreign policy of any state is to secure its national interest. There is no permanent friend or foe in politics. Until recently, it was considered contemptuous even to think that someday United States will take a stance against the wishes of its closest cronies (Israel and Saudi Arabia). However, the world powers including United States have signed the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 – Times have changed therefore, the policies have to change.

The lifting of economic sanctions after Iran nuclear deal, the nefarious designs of Pakistan's archrival India, turbulent Pak-Afghan border, peaceful Pak-Iran border, new chapter in Pak-Russia relations and the fresh emerging Iran, China long term strategic partnership are enough reasons for Pakistan to immediately take necessary steps to improve relations with Iran; otherwise, India will do maximum efforts to sabotage Pakistan's interest.

It is a new direction that will lead Pakistan to economic growth and financial stability. It provides an opportunity for Pakistan to play an imperative role in promoting regional trade, economic cooperation and peace. The one basic reason of the growing Chinese economy is the advancement of trade and economic relations with regional countries. Pakistan should follow the footsteps of its oldest and closest ally China. Therefore, it is in the best interest of Pakistan to seize this opportunity by initiating a multidimensional relationship with Iran.

**Source:** <http://nation.com.pk/columns/01-Feb-2016/iran-china-partnership-an-opportunity>