

***Iran and China: A New Approach to Their Bilateral Relations.*** Shirzad Azad. Lexington Books. 2017. 109 pp. (ISBN-13: 9781498544573)

In a book of about 100 pages, Shirzad Azad takes us on a journey, rich in detail, into the history of relations between Iran and China since the 1980s. The 1980s is taken as a starting date since that is the date of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The book is organized into 5 chapters which take a look at 5 different periods in the two countries' bilateral relations under changing leaders in both countries, which mostly coincide with these periods. Chapter 1 highlights the relationship at the beginning of the 1980s and especially the period of the Iran-Iraq war. Chapter 2 addresses Iran's period of reconstruction after the war and China's period of economic boom, a period which also coincides with the end of the Cold War. Chapter 3 evaluates the relationship mostly from a cultural nexus, while Chapter 4 addresses the peak period of financial and trade relations between the two countries as well as the problematic sides of the relationship during this period, demonstrating the complex nature of the relationship. Finally, Chapter 5 tries to put together the most recent developments in the two countries' relationship with an eye on the aftermath of the nuclear deal between Iran and the West and the launch of the New Silk Road policy of China.

The last chapter also puts forward 3 different scenarios about the potential direction the relationship between the two countries may go in the future. While writing, the author makes a visible effort to take into consideration the zeitgeist in each country in the particular period he talks about as well as the personalities and the ruling styles or policy priorities of the leaders of the two countries during those periods. For example, he often tries to explain under which circumstances particular Iranian decision makers arrived at their policies regarding their relations with China and the kinds of reactions they faced as a result of their chosen policies.

At the beginning of the work, the author distinguishes two possible ways of looking at Iran-China relations, arguing that the two states are regarded either as "perfect" or "limited partners". The author skillfully shows that the truth is more complex than this simplification of "this" or "that", arguing that bilateral relations have been a ride with ups and downs for both countries. Throughout the book, one finds the different foci of their relationship which are sometimes contrasting yet at other times complementary: an oil rich Iran versus an energy hungry China, a sanctioned Iran versus a booming China, an anti-Western Iran versus a China aiming at rapprochement with

the West, a nuclear aspiring Iran versus an already nuclear China, a theocratic Iran which embraces religious values in governance versus an anti-religious China which is worried about the impact of religion on its own religious minorities.

Although not written on the basis of a theoretical perspective in international relations, the book provides ample examples in support of the realist theory of international relations. It does this firstly by showing how the two countries define and re-define their relations with one another according to national interests that change over time, and secondly by looking at the constraints each country has in approaching the other given the position each country feels it should occupy within the international system. The story of Iranian-Chinese bilateral relations is a great example of how relations between two countries do not happen in a vacuum but are also affected, fine-tuned, and even reshaped, by how these countries define themselves vis-à-vis others, especially vis-à-vis other major world or regional powers and how both countries interact with the rest of the world while also interacting with one another. The author even demonstrates how each country's individual rapprochement with the West at different times is also perceived as a risk by the other party. The book also addresses the issue of cooperation and its limits in an anarchic world.

The book may be on Iran-China relations by name. However, its content serves anyone interested in international politics by going into detail on the intricacies of sanction politics, costs of voluntary and forced isolationism, policies to remedy these costs, and how countries which at some point find or position themselves outside or on the margins of the international system such as Iran, China, Taiwan, and even North Korea develop overlapping interests for survival and find areas of cooperation despite their cultural and even ideological differences.

The 5 chapters of the book mostly follow both a chronological and a thematic path, and they are each broken down into small thematic sections of 1-2 pages in length which highlight important issues in each period. These small thematic sections facilitate reading and understanding and shed light on interesting points such as the military deals between the two countries during the Iran-Iraq War or the role played by what the author calls the "Dubai factor" in the international trade of a sanctioned Iran. The book is written using a rich and sophisticated vocabulary which makes it an interesting and exciting read for language enthusiasts. However, it would surely challenge non-native speakers or those who would only like to focus on the content.

The author is apparently well-positioned to pen a book on bilateral relations between the two countries since he seems knowledgeable about the political histories and cultures of both countries, being originally from Iran and having lived in East

Asia for more than a decade. Yet, the details in the book are often and unsurprisingly richer when it comes to the Iranian side of the story. For example, he seems to provide a clearer picture of how the Iranian public perceives China than how the Chinese public perceives Iran.

Overall, Azad's work is a valuable contribution not only for understanding the recent past and modern day in Iranian-Chinese relations, but also addresses some of the larger issues in power politics as well as the opportunities and limits of cooperative behavior between states under pressure.

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