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The Prospects of a China-Iran Axis

By Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein / August 10, 2020

What will ties between China and Iran look like in the future? A recently leaked draft of a partnership agreement between Beijing and Tehran may provide some insight. The document outlines a framework for increased Chinese investment in Iran, strategic cooperation, and Iran's integration in China's Belt and Road Initiative. The potential agreement has rattled some in Washington, stoking concerns that America's assertive foreign policy has solidified a dangerous alliance between key, anti-American powers in East Asia and the Middle East.

The unsigned draft agreement was likely leaked by the Iranian government — the document is in Farsi and Tehran seemed eager to publicize it. In contrast, Beijing appears hesitant to address the deal in public, let alone issue any kind of endorsement. China's unenthusiastic reaction may be the result of annoyance at Iran's leaking of the document, a cost-benefit calculation that publicly endorsing it could further poison China's vital relationship with Washington, and/or concerns that it would inflict reputational harm on Beijing among its other partners in the Middle East. Nevertheless, China has not renounced the document either.

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