

# Iran's Cognition of the "Belt and Road" Initiative from the Perspective of Cognitive Psychology<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The "Belt and Road" initiative is a foreign cooperation initiative proposed and actively promoted by China in 2013. Its purpose is to promote the formation of a community of responsibilities, interests, and destiny among countries along the route by building mutually trusting economic and trade relations under the background of a new type of globalization. The Middle East is a must pass and an important region for the "Belt

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and Road” initiative, and its attitudes and policies is crucial to the smooth progress of the “Belt and Road” initiative. There are many countries in the Middle East, and their national conditions are also different. It is not realistic to study one by one. Therefore, this article attempts to start from the representative and overall significance of regional powers to study their perceptions of the “Belt and Road” initiative. This article takes Iran, a major country in the Middle East, as the main research object to study its perception of the “Belt and Road” initiative. This article applies the theoretical methods of cognitive psychology to Iran for case analysis. First, this article divides the subject of cognition into three levels: political, academic, and non-governmental; Secondly, this article will summarize the main factors that influence Iran’s dual cognition through the interpretation of the three cognitive subjects’ cognition of the “Belt and Road” initiative; Finally, this article focuses on Iran’s cognition of the “Belt and Road” initiative. Propose

countermeasures to deepen benign cognition.

**Keywords:** Cognition; "One Belt One Road" Initiative; Iran

In September 2013, President Xi Jinping put forward the concept of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" for the first time in Kazakhstan. He emphasized that "in order to make countries' economic ties closer, mutual cooperation deeper, and development space broader, we can use innovative cooperation models, To jointly build the 'Silk Road Economic Belt', from point to surface, from line to piece, and gradually form regional cooperation". In October 2013, President Xi further proposed in Indonesia that "China is willing to strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries, make good use of the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund established by the Chinese government, develop maritime partnerships, and jointly build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road'." This formed the "One Belt One Road" initiative.

As China's "One Belt One Road" initiative has



continuously achieved new results, some countries have also questioned and opposed the initiative. Common remarks include: China's "One Belt One Road" initiative is a Chinese version of the "Marshall Plan"; China's "One Belt One Road" initiative has brought debt traps to countries along the route; "One Belt One Road" initiative is a China's tool to challenge to the existing international politics and economy order, etc.

In response to the above remarks, China has also given relevant responses. When President Xi Jinping first mentioned the "Belt and Road" initiative, he said that the core essence of the "Belt and Road" initiative is "to discuss, build together, and share." China is an advocate and promoter of the "Belt and Road", but the construction of the "Belt and Road" requires the participation of the international community. At present, the process of globalization has been frustrated, the speed of world economic development has slowed down, and the construction of the "Belt and Road" has

embarked on a new starting point. China has always insisted on welcoming countries around the world to participate in the construction of the "Belt and Road" with an active and open attitude.

### **1.Iran's Status and Role in the "Belt and Road Initiative"**

As a representative Middle East country, Iran is an important country along the "Belt and Road". Its attitude plays a vital role in the smooth progress of the "Belt and Road" in the Middle East. As a regional power, Iran's foreign policy and attitude changes will have an important impact on neighboring countries. First, in the political field, after Iran accepts the "Belt and Road" initiative, it can use its strong regional influence to influence the foreign policies of neighboring countries, laying a good foundation for the "Belt and Road" initiative to enter the Middle East. Secondly, in terms of geography, Iran guards strategic points and key transportation channels, and plays a geopolitical role that



cannot be replaced by a small country. Such as Iran’s control of the Strait of Hormuz, the world’s energy “valve”. Third, in the economic field, Iran plays the role of leader and engine of economic cooperation in its region. After regional powers join the “Belt and Road” initiative, they will encourage other economies in the region to actively join. Finally, in the field of culture, Iran has a strong cultural radiation and attraction in the region where it is located, and it can play a leading role in the construction of the “Belt and Road” people-to-people bond.

Iran is one of the largest countries in the Middle East with the strongest overall national strength. It ranks fourth in the Middle East in terms of land area; second in population in the Middle East; third in GDP in the Middle East and 25th in the world; and its military industry ranks among the best in the Middle East. Iran straddles the two major oil producing areas of the Gulf and the Caspian Sea, and its geographic location is extremely important. First

of all, Iran is an important partner for China to allocate “two resources and two markets”. In terms of energy, Iran is an important partner to ensure China’s energy security. In terms of economy and trade, Iran is an important overseas market for China’s national industry. Secondly, China faces the containment and prevention of countries such as the United States and Japan in the east, and the threat of the “three forces” in the west. Iran is a natural barrier to ensure the security of China’s western border. Third, China’s participation in shaping the international order is facing an important period of opportunity. Iran is an important force for China to participate in the formulation of a new international political and economic order and increase its international influence. Finally, Iran is an important fulcrum for China to implement the “Belt and Road” initiative. As China’s dependence on foreign energy increases, China is increasingly inseparable from the Middle East. The purpose of the “Belt and Road”



initiative is to strengthen in-depth cooperation with Eurasia, and the Middle East is an important link. In addition, China is also very important to Iran. Iran has been sanctioned by the international community led by the United States for a long time, and its domestic economic development has stalled, and it urgently needs capital investment and economic assistance from China.

## **2. Overview of Cognitive Psychology Theory**

### **2.1 Related Concepts**

The cognitive psychology system gradually formed in the 1980s. Cognition refers to the perception and cognitive activities in the human brain, that is, the processes of human consciousness, perception, attention, memory, problem solving and reasoning. During this period, information processing theory was the main guiding theory of cognitive psychology. This theory compared the human brain to a computer, and believed that the cognitive process of the human brain was the



process of information processing. Cognitive psychology takes human cognitive activities as the main research object. In the study of low-level cognitive processes such as sensation, perception, and short-term memory, the sensory channels are different, and the speed vision method, the listening method and the target search method are adopted. In the study of high-level cognitive processes such as thinking, problem solving, concept formation and reasoning, language comprehension, and knowledge use, oral reporting, content analysis, and meta-analysis are used (Liang, p.2).

Cognitive psychology can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense. Cognitive psychology in the narrow sense is guided by the theory of information processing, and the cognitive process of the human brain is analogous to the information processing process of a computer (He, p.8). Cognitive psychology in a broad sense mainly discusses the process of mental activity within the human brain, the occurrence and development of cognition,



and the mental activities of people, such as mental events, mental representations, beliefs, and ideas. Cognitive psychology in a broad sense is no longer limited to information itself, but also pays attention to how people's own cognitive abilities such as images and beliefs are produced.

## 2.2 Cognitive Object

Traditional cognitive psychology only discusses the cognition between individuals, but with the deepening of research, a group of researchers such as He Hua expands the cognition between individuals to the existence and role of people in the relationship between people and society. The influence of psychology and group psychology, etc (He, pp. 226-230). The research of He Hua et al. extended the subject of the actor from the individual to other actors.

The main research object of international relations is international relations actors, including international organizations, state actors, and sub-state actors. Due to

changes in international relations actors, cognition has also expanded accordingly. In the cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative in the Middle East countries studied in this article, the expansion of cognition includes: the expansion of cognitive subject, cognitive phenomenon, cognitive level, and cognitive image.

In the cognition of international relations, subjects are no longer limited to individuals, but include individuals, state actors, and international organizations. In the cognition of international relations, the subjects of cognition include: political circles (heads, ministers, diplomats), academic circles (scholars, think tanks), and non-governmental (peoples of various countries, including groups and individuals), etc.

Although cognition becomes abstract after rising from the individual to the level of international actors, cognition can be analyzed from related phenomena. Cognition can be presented from multiple perspectives in international relations: the mutual trust between



countries, the closeness of exchanges between academic circles, and the degree of non-governmental exchanges between the two countries. Mutual trust between countries can be reflected in textual language such as meetings between leaders and cooperation documents signed by the two countries; the closeness of exchanges between think tank elites can be reflected in the frequency of academic exchanges between the think tanks of the two countries; non-governmental exchanges The degree of interaction can be reflected in media reports, polls and television interviews.

### **2.3 Cognitive Research Level**

Human cognitive activities have different levels and levels. Attention, perception, memory, thinking, etc. are general cognitive activities, and how a person can control his attention, memory and thinking activities, learn how to learn, think and develop himself better and actively, that is, how a person Being able to regulate and control one's own cognitive activity process belongs to a higher

level of cognitive activity.

Cognitive psychology divides human cognition into three levels: representation, cognition, and metacognition. The so-called representation refers to the image in the mind of things that have been perceived but not currently perceived. For example, "the remnant sound around the beam", "the lingering fragrance of the nose", "the sound and the fullness" and so on are all representational activities (He, p.45).

In the 1920s, the famous American psychologist Flavell proposed a new concept of the latter kind of cognitive activity based on his own and other' research in many aspects: metacognition. He believes that metacognition is "reflection or regulation of any aspect of knowledge or cognitive activities of human cognitive activities." Flavell clearly understands metacognition as knowledge about cognition and activities that regulate cognition. The latter is a dynamic cognitive process, which is the individual's adjustment and monitoring of



cognitive activities. The most basic feature of metacognition is that the individual regards cognition itself as an object.

Metacognition is an individual's cognition of various factors such as one's own psychological process, cognitive strategies, target tasks, etc. It is based on the cognitive process and results, and takes the regulation and monitoring of one's own cognitive activities as the external performance, activity procedure. Metacognition is different from cognition because it reflects the cognition of one's own "cognition". Therefore, compared with cognitive activities, metacognition is a higher-level thinking activity, including the active control of cognitive processing in the learning process, such as supervising the degree of understanding, planning tasks and evaluating task progress, etc., in essence It's all metacognition (Liang, p.314-316).

The study of cognition in the field of international relations has also changed. In psychology, cognition

explores the three levels of representation, cognition, and metacognition. In the study of international relations, according to the different subjects of cognition, it can be divided into three levels: politics, academia, and folk. At the political level, the activities of national leaders such as heads of state, government, and speakers, and the interaction between leaders and other officials are the elements of analysis; at the academic level, the cognition of scholars, think tanks, etc. Cognition has a certain guiding role; at the non-governmental level, the communication and interaction of non-governmental organizations and foreign students are also important factors in analyzing cognition.

## **2.4 The Main Influencing Factors of Cognition**

The famous psychologist Piaget believes that maturity, physical environment, social environment, and self-regulating balance process are the four main factors that affect cognitive development. These four factors are all necessary conditions for cognitive development, but



none of them are sufficient in themselves.

Maturity refers to the growth of the body, especially the maturation of the human nervous and endocrine systems. Maturity is the basis of cognitive development and provides a basis for the body to produce new thinking and behavior patterns. For example, eye-hand coordination in infancy is a necessary condition for constructing baby's action diagrams. However, if this possibility is to become a reality, it must be through functional exercises and a minimum of acquired experience to enhance the role of maturity.

Since the interaction between the individual and the environment is the source of cognition, the individual must act on things or objects, and then gain experience in the exercises, which is different from the experience gained in the social environment. Piaget divides this experience into two categories: the first category is the physical experience that the individual obtains by acting on the object to obtain the characteristics of the object;



the second category is the logical-mathematical experience of the individual through understanding the coordination of actions. Piaget believes that knowledge does not come from objects, but from actions, because actions play an organizing or coordinating role.

The social environment includes the role of education and language, that is, the transmission and interaction of social culture between individuals, and the learner's social experience may accelerate or hinder the development of their cognitive schema. Most learning theories and development theories emphasize the role of maturity and experience. On this basis, Piaget put forward the important factor of the balance process that plays a role of self-regulation.

The main field of social cognition research is the advanced cognitive process of social behavior, that is, the information processing process that can promote behavioral responses between individuals of the same kind. International relations study the relationship and



interaction of similar actors, so the cognition of international relations can also be regarded as a kind of social cognition.

Social cognition is affected by many factors, among which belief and environment are the two most important factors. The belief system includes the long-term world outlook, values and political beliefs of the actors, which influence the interpretation and analysis of the political situation by the actors. Belief constructs the expectations or expectations of the actors on the prospects. Once the political environment changes, the actors use the expectations or expectations to analyze political events, and then influence the cognition and behavior of the actors. The maturity of individual cognition is mainly the maturity of the physiology and nervous system, while the maturity of social cognition is the analysis and judgment ability established by behaviors based on beliefs.

Belief provides the actors with the desired utility,

while the environment provides the conditions and opportunities for the realization of the desired utility. The behavior of the actor can be analyzed internally and externally, and the environment is the limiting factor for the cognition of the actor. As the limiting condition of cognition, compared with Piaget's factors that affect individual cognition, it is the physical environment and social environment for the individual, and the internal environment and the external environment for social cognition. In the study of specific international relations, the influencing factors of actor cognition also change according to the relationship between the subject and object of cognition.

The American scholar Robert Jervis analyzes international relations from the micro-level, that is, the psychology of decision-makers, in the book "Perceptions and Misperceptions in International Politics". It is an important work on the cognitive psychology of international politics. Jervis analyzes the individual



decision maker as the subject of cognition in the book. However, most scholars study the state as a cognitive subject with behavioral capabilities. Winter, a representative of constructivism, believes that “the shared knowledge of all individuals recreates the concept of the state as a group person or group self” (Alexander, p.276). Winter believes that the country as a collective of “people” also has its own way of thinking and behavior, making the country personified “not just for the convenience of analysis, but an indispensable method for predicting and interpreting state behavior” (Alexander, p.279). Although this article takes the state as the main cognitive agent, in order to fully understand the state's cognition of things, it uses three actors smaller than the state, namely, the political circle, the academic circle, and the civil society.

In the book, Jervis explores the influence of decision-makers' psychological tendencies on decision-making, and points out the main influencing factors of false perception, including cognitive conformity, induced

stereotypes, and historical baggage.

The first is the phenomenon of cognitive conformity. People always have a certain understanding of things in the world, and then they are preserved in memory to form their original cognition. From a psychological point of view, people have a tendency to maintain their original knowledge. When they receive new information, they always subconsciously keep the new information in line with the original knowledge. This is cognitive conformity (Robert, p.13). To a large extent, conformity is understood as a strong cognitive orientation, that is, people tend to see what they expect to see, and tend to include the received information into their original information (Robert, p.112). If the information received by the decision maker is inconsistent with the original knowledge, the decision maker will turn a blind eye to the new information, or misunderstand and misjudge, in order to keep the new information consistent with the original knowledge.



The second is to induce stereotypes. When people receive information, they will take the issues they focused on and consider at the time as a set of trends, and interpret the information they have received accordingly. "A person will recognize and interpret stimulus factors based on immediate associations. Therefore, to infer what a person can infer from some kind of evidence, we often need to know the person's concern and the information he has just received (Ibid., p.206). Actors tend to follow the actions of other actors with their own focus. "Concentrating on one problem produces a kind of tunnel vision" (Ibid., p.216). Tunnel vision refers to the decision-maker's personal belief that others have the same concerns as themselves, so they judge that they have the same intentions to achieve the same goals as themselves. Jervis used the Pearl Harbor incident as a case analysis. He believed that the U.S. government realized that Pearl Harbor might be attacked and reminded the locals to be vigilant. The commander

of Pearl Harbor was paying attention to the sabotage activities of the secret agents at the time and formed a mindset. And not realizing that Washington reminded him to pay attention to preventing external attacks.

The third is historical baggage. Jervis believes that history has two sides, which can provide reference for decision makers, but also burden them. In his book, Jervis puts forward a "two-stage hypothesis model: historical events—historical experience and lessons—future behavior. Two of the connecting lines are probabilistic. He believes that historical analogies will also be given due to human cognitive limitations. Decision makers bring burdens and deliberately link some real events with historical events, causing false perceptions (*Ibid.*, p.15).

### **3. Iran's Perception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

Cognition is the basic knowledge, opinions, and conclusions that people get after observing things. When extended to the field of international relations, it refers to the views, positioning, and strategies among



international relations actors. Cognition can also be the construction of international relations actors to influence other actors' perceptions and cognitions of themselves. Cognition belongs to the category of ideas and consciousness in the field of international relations, and occupies a subordinate position in traditional international relations.

Cognitive science is a science that studies the formation and transcription of information. The main research fields include psychology, neurology, linguistics, philosophy, etc. This article mainly uses cognitive psychology to conduct a systematic study on the cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative in the Middle East countries, supplementing the deficiencies of traditional international relations research. The book "Cognitive Psychology" by American scholar Best gives a brief introduction to the research methods of cognitive psychology, and provides theoretical and methodological guidance on the psychological level for cognitive



research.

The cognitive psychology school believes that the human brain is similar to a computer, and both are a kind of information processing system. Although the human brain structure is different from the computer's hardware, the computer's operating system can be compared with the human cognitive process. The computer accepts symbol input and encodes, and then organizes and processes the encoding to output the symbol. This kind of information processing system can be compared to humans. After receiving information, people store and memorize the information, and then output the information after analysis.

As far as Iran's perception of the "Belt and Road Initiative" is concerned, it is difficult to analyze the perceptions of diplomatic decision-makers. They can only draw conclusions from the research methods of cognitive psychology, through analysis of representations and observation of the relationship between the two parties.



From the perspective of information input, we can analyze the cross-border flow of commodities, materials, etc., and the level and frequency of high-level leaders' mutual visits; from the perspective of information processing, it can be recognized from the memoirs, diaries, and notes of diplomats and decision makers. Analyze the process of knowledge formation; from the perspective of information output, it can be analyzed in terms of agreements, diplomatic declarations, and leaders' speeches.

Iran's cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative can be completely linked to the cognition of cognitive psychology, and learn from the research methods of cognitive psychology to analyze the relationship between the cognitive agent itself and the agent. The traditional theory of international relations focuses on the material level, and the research object of this thesis-Iran's cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative must first be based on the existing theoretical results. On this basis, it

is undoubtedly of pioneering significance to introduce the basic views and methods of cognitive psychology into Iran's research on the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Cognitive psychology of international politics believes that individuals are important actors in a country's foreign behavior and foreign policy formulation. As a rational actor, the individual is affected by cognitive ability and environment. The status of the individual in the study of international relations can be studied using the analytic hierarchy process. To study Iran's cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative, research can be conducted from three levels: political, academic, and non-governmental.

The political level can analyze the official views on the initiative, and leaders and government officials are important reference factors for the generation of cognition. The academic level surpasses most ordinary people in society in terms of material and spiritual abilities, and plays an important role in promoting the



development of society. The academic level generally has a high level of education, relatively rich experience, and even directly participates in national decision-making. It has a prominent influence on national affairs and has an important impact on the country's awareness of the "Belt and Road" initiative. The non-governmental level can start from the individual consciousness of the people and analyze the characteristics of cognition more intuitively. As a representative of public opinion, the non-governmental level can also examine the extent and depth of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Since the drastic changes in the Middle East in 2011, the situation in West Asia and North Africa has undergone major changes. Due to the decline of the Arab world, non-Arab countries such as Iran, Turkey, Israel and other countries are increasingly influential in the Middle East. Since the split of the Gulf Cooperation Council in June 2017, Iran has strengthened its influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and other countries. Iran plays an

important role in the process of regional change and is therefore China's ideal political partner in the region. From the perspective of Iran, on the one hand, its active participation in the "Belt and Road Initiative" is conducive to further improving its regional status; on the other hand, China's active participation in Middle East affairs also has a certain impact on its status as a regional power.

Three groups of groups have played a key role in forming Iran's awareness of the "Belt and Road" initiative. The first group is a political group composed of Iranian politicians. Iranian politics can be divided into two major factions, reformers and conservatives, and they have different perceptions of the "Belt and Road" initiative. The second category is a group of academics composed of scholars who are critical of the "Belt and Road" initiative, believing that while the initiative brings development opportunities to Iran, it also brings certain challenges. They emphasized China's threat and



suggested balancing China's influence by expanding relations with the European Union and other major powers. The third group is a non-governmental organization represented by the Iranian business community and the media. They are the embodiment of public opinion.

### **3.1 Iranian Political Circles' Perception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has established a political system in which Islam and democracy coexist. On the one hand, Iran implements the Fakih system, that is, the guardianship system of religious jurists. The supreme leader, as the holder of the highest power, has the final decision-making power on Iran's internal affairs and foreign affairs, and has played an important role in the formulation of Iran's internal and external policies. At the same time, the establishment of such institutions as the Expert Meeting, the Constitutional Guardianship Committee, and the

National Interests Determination Committee fully guaranteed the interests of the clergy. On the other hand, Iran practices universal suffrage and separation of powers, referring to the Western democratic representative system. Both the president and the parliament are elected by the domestic people. The president and his government and parliament, as representatives of public opinion, also have important decision-making powers in Iran's internal and foreign affairs. In Iran's political circles, the supreme leader, president, government ministers, and members of parliament all have an important influence on Iran's internal affairs and diplomacy. Therefore, this article uses the above-mentioned individuals as the subject of cognition to examine the political cognition of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

Since China put forward the "Belt and Road" initiative, especially after President Xi Jinping visited Iran in 2016, most Iranian political circles have always welcomed the initiative. However, some politicians still



expressed doubts about the “Belt and Road” initiative and the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan.

First, Iran’s supreme leader, president and politicians expressed support for the “Belt and Road” initiative and the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan.

When President Xi Jinping visited Iran in 2016, he met with Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei in Tehran. Khamenei said that China’s “Belt and Road” initiative came at the right time. As an important country along the route, Iran hopes to play an active role in the construction of the “Belt and Road”.

In September 2017, President Rouhani stated at the UN General Assembly: “Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s new plan in this area, we have discussed this issue with President Xi Jinping many times, and Iran is willing to cooperate with China in this plan. The “Belt and Road” initiative is conducive to the economic interests of all countries along the route. We welcome this initiative and we have discussed it with the



Chinese authorities. Such a statement confirms Iran's support for the "Belt and Road" initiative (Gao, 2018).

According to a report from Agence France-Presse on July 5, 2020, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif stated that Iran is negotiating with China to reach a 25-year cooperation plan. Khamenei expressed support for this and said that reaching an agreement with China is in line with its "Looking East" policy (Radio Farda, 2020).

Iranian Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs Farhad Dejpasand expressed during the second "Belt and Road" International Cooperation Summit Forum in Beijing in May 2019 that he considered Iran's background on the Silk Road. Iran's share in the "Belt and Road" initiative should increase. The "Belt and Road" initiative is very important to Iran, and Iran has been responding to the initiative very well (Tehran Times, 2019).

In 2020, Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that Iran and China have drafted a 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan. The Iranian cabinet



finally approved the final draft of the 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan between China and Iran. Rouhani said, this cooperation has laid the foundation for Iran and China to participate in infrastructure cooperation. It is also an opportunity for Iran to attract investment in various fields such as industry, tourism, and information technology (Tehran Times, 2020a).

On June 29, 2020, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Abbas Mousavi stated that the cooperation plan between the two countries has not yet been finalized. However, he said that once the agreement is finalized, its contents will be announced. Mousavi refuted the claims that the two sides will conduct new negotiations on the cooperation plan and said that the cooperation plan is in the interests of both countries. On July 5, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif stated that the long-term comprehensive agreement between Iran and China has no hidden problems (Tehran Times, 2020b).

Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's ambassador to Vienna and

permanent representative to international organizations, said that the opposition of the United States and its allies shows that the long-term cooperation plan between Iran and China is a "correct" and "wise" decision (Tehran Times, 2020c).

Second, some important Iranian politicians believe that the 25-year cooperation plan is the result of secret negotiations between China and Iran at the top level, betraying Iran's national interests.

On June 27, 2020, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former President of Iran and current member of the Iranian National Affirmation of Interests Committee, delivered a speech criticizing the China-Iran 25-year comprehensive cooperation plan, believing that the cooperation plan harmed Iran's national interest. Ahmadinejad said: "Any agreement signed with a foreign party that does not take into account the needs and wishes of the Iranian people and goes against the interests of the country and the people is invalid, and



the Iranian people will not recognize it.”

On July 5, 2020, Congressman Mohammad-hassan Asfari accused Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif of concealing the 25-year cooperation plan negotiations from the parliament. On July 8, Congressman Mohamed Reza Sabahjian further accused Rouhani of giving China too many concessions. Another congressman, Mojtaba Zolnouri attacked Zarif from another angle, criticizing Zarif’s diplomatic focus should be to force the United States to return to a comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue, rather than seeking a deal with China reach a bilateral cooperation agreement (Ali, 2020).

Ali Motahali is a well-known Iranian political activist who has served as a member of the Iranian parliament for many times. His father is Morteza Motahali, the patriarch of the Islamic Revolution. He was supported by the Iranian people for daring to criticize the internal affairs of Iran. He criticized the Sino-Iranian 25-year

cooperation plan by expressing the legitimacy of Iran's cooperation with China. His statement intensified the Iranian people's prejudice against China, and the "victim psychology" in the Iranian national character was stimulated, which had a negative impact on the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan.

Abbas Abdi is a well-known reformist political activist in Iran and has an important influence among Iranian enlightened intellectuals. He clearly expressed his opposition to the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan, and believes that Iran should sign the same agreement with multiple major powers at the same time. If it only signs with China, it will form a great dependence on China.

### **3.2 Iranian Academic Circles' Perception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

Iranian academic circles have formed two different and contradictory views on the development of relations with China under the "Belt and Road" initiative.



These two attitudes can be called positive support and doubt. Traditionally, reformists in Iran’s political sphere tend to expand their ties with the West, and are skeptical of Eastern powers (especially Russia and China). However, conservatives with a deep anti-Western background believe that Russia and China are potential allies of Iran and can resist the continuous pressure of the United States and promote its anti-hegemonic foreign policy. This article attempts to analyze the cognition of the “Belt and Road” initiative in Iranian academic circles with Iranian universities and think tank scholars as the subject of cognition.

First, Iranian scholars agree with the “Belt and Road” initiative and the 25-year China-Iran cooperation plan to be concluded on this basis.

Professor Bahram Amirahmadian of the University of Tehran believes that today’s world is becoming increasingly competitive, and Iran’s share of world trade is less than 1%. Therefore, Iran should provide the

necessary political conditions for economic activities. There is no doubt that China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative is extremely attractive, and the Iranian authorities should prepare for joining China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and formulate some specific plans (Bahram, 2016).

Ali Agha Mohammadi, Khamenei's chief economic adviser, said that given Iran's limited economic options, a sharply devalued currency, and the slim prospects for the United States to lift sanctions, an agreement with China may be for them Provide a lifeline(Farnaz & Steven, 2020).

Second, Iranian scholars believe that Iran, as an important country on the ancient Silk Road and the "Belt and Road", has not received enough attention from China. In addition, due to the Iranian nuclear issue, which has been sanctioned by the international community, China has doubts about cooperation with Iran.

Vali Kaleji, an expert at the Iranian Center for



Strategic Research (CSR), believes that unlike Iran, Pakistan has received considerable attention in the “Belt and Road” initiative. Iran’s status in China’s “One Belt and One Road” initiative is generally limited. Therefore, the Iranian government must act like Pakistan, requesting China to determine an appropriate position for Iran in the “One Belt and One Road” initiative, and provide each Plan to allocate the required budget(Vali, 2016).

Masoud Rezaei, a visiting researcher at the Tehran Middle East Institute for Strategic Studies (CMESS), believes that Iran and China should strengthen cooperation. As the Iranian nuclear issue makes the country’s foreign policy uncertain, China has doubts when it comes to cooperation with Iran. In particular, the cooperation between Iran and India at Chabahar Port and the flagship project of the “Belt and Road” initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, constituted a competitive relationship, which aroused dissatisfaction in China. The author believes that Iran occupies an



important position in the "Belt and Road" initiative due to its geo-strategic position, and China and Iran should strengthen communication and cooperation (Masoud, 2016).

The Iranian ambassador to Russia, Mehdi Sanaei, and the associate professor of Tehran University, Jahangir Karami, believe that Iran is one of the main countries on the ancient Silk Road and played an important role in the "Belt and Road" initiative (Mehdi & Jahangir, (2018).

Third, Iranian scholars analyzed the dual impact of China's "Belt and Road" initiative on Iran from the perspectives of geopolitics and geoeconomics. They believed that China's presence in Central Asia brought opportunities for Iran and threatened Iran's influence in the region force. At the same time, they believe that the conditions for China and Iran to reach a 25-year cooperation plan are not yet ripe.

Professor Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi of Shahid Behshti University in Iran consider Iran as one of



the participating countries of the “Belt and Road” initiative. The realization of the “Belt and Road” initiative has had two impacts on Iran’s geo-economic and political status. On the one hand, the initiative can enhance China’s presence and influence in the political and economic aspects of Iran and its surrounding areas, and create competition between Iran and China. On the other hand, Iran’s participation in the “Belt and Road” initiative will help restore Iran’s domestic economic development and increase its regional influence. Therefore, Iran has fallen into hope and fear for the “Belt and Road” initiative (Mohsen & Hamidreza, 2019).

Hamidreza Azizi, a lecturer at Shahid Beheshti University and a researcher at The Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies (IRAS), learned from geopolitics From a perspective, China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative centers on Central Asia and competes economically with Iran in the region (Hamidreza, 2016).

Sadegh Zibakalam, a professor of political science

at the University of Tehran, has a huge influence in Iran. His Instagram account, a popular messaging software in Iran, has 1.03 million followers, while Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif has only 758,000 followers. He believes that the reason why the Iranian people do not support the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan is that Iran's educated middle class does not trust China and Russia like the government. Compared with China and Russia, the Iranian people have a more favorable impression of European countries. They believe that the government is becoming dependent on China and losing its independence.

Iranian economist Hossein Raghfar said that the China-Iran 25-year cooperation plan may cause Iran to fall into a "debt trap". He believes that China does not regard Iran as a strategic ally, but an important customer. China did not firmly support Iran in the Iran nuclear agreement. On the contrary, it was the party that made the most profit during Iran's sanctions. In addition, he



cited the example of Sri Lanka's 99-year lease of its port to China because it was unable to repay its debts. He believed that China-Iran cooperation would also fall into this debt trap.

### **3.3 Iranian Non-governmental's Perception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

First, Iranian industrial and commercial personnel and China-Iran non-governmental friendly exchange groups have a positive perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

On January 20, 2016, the President of the Iran-China Friendship Association, Ahad Mohammadi, said in an exclusive interview with China Central Television, President Xi Jinping will visit Iran. We are very happy because this will definitely open up relations between the two countries. At present, international politics and the situation in the Middle East are changing at any time. Therefore, all sectors of Iran are looking forward to President Xi's visit, hoping that we can hold talks with

China on regional issues and bilateral relations, and further deepen our relationship with China (Tehran Times, 2016).

On May 8, 2018, the inaugural meeting of the China-Iran Business Council and the first board meeting were held in Beijing. Hassan Tawana, Chairman of the Iran-Iran Chamber of Commerce in Iran, pointed out in his speech that since the "Belt and Road Initiative" was proposed, the economic ties between China and Iran have been strengthened and bilateral trade cooperation has become increasingly close.

Masoud, director of VAHID REFRIGERATION IND, a well-known manufacturing company in Iran, said: "China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative has brought closer relations between China and Iran, especially when other countries have suspended cooperation with us due to unilateral sanctions by the United States. China's persistence is of great significance to us."

Second, ordinary people in Iran have a negative



perception of the “Belt and Road” or don’t know much about it at all.

Teacher Lu Jin from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found through field research that ordinary people in Iran do not know much about the “Belt and Road” initiative (Lu, 2015). Iranian taxi drivers, salespersons, and businessmen all lack understanding of the “Belt and Road” initiative. During Lu Jin’s visit, she found that young Iranians are more concerned about current affairs and obtain international current affairs through mobile phones and the Internet every day. They have a certain understanding of the “Belt and Road”, but other groups know little about the “Belt and Road”. In addition, due to the close trade between China and Iran, a large number of Chinese goods have entered Iran. However, because Iranian importers imported low-priced Chinese goods as shoddy products in pursuit of profits, and the lack of strict supervision by Iranian customs, some of the poorer quality Chinese goods entered the Iranian market,

which harmed the interests of the Iranian people. In addition, Iranian and Western media used this incident to criticize Chinese products and even the "Belt and Road" initiative, which has a negative impact on the perception of the Iranian people.

Third, the Iranian media has reported more on the "Belt and Road" initiative, and the overall attitude is relatively positive, covering a wide range of aspects, including politics, economy, culture, military and many other aspects.

Iran Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) is Iran's official news agency and has important influence in Iran. IRNA has 60 branches in Iran and more than 30 offices around the world. In August 2019, IRNA officially launched a Chinese website. From September 2013 to January 2020, IRNA released a total of 689 news related to the "Belt and Road" initiative. IRNA has both agreed and doubted in its news descriptions, showing the Iranian media's dual understanding of the "Belt and Road"



initiative. In addition, the source of the commentary report of IRNA is mainly from Iran's domestic news, supplemented by foreign news such as Europe and the United States. The Chinese news is the least. This reflects that the Iranian media sector has less communication with China and also shows China's "Belt and Road" initiative. The external publicity needs to be strengthened.

From September 2013 to October 2018, there were 34 reports on the "Belt and Road" initiative in the Tehran Times and Mehr News Agency. The sources reported by the two major news agencies are mainly Iranian officials and foreign sources such as Europe and the United States. There are only two pieces of news from Chinese officials, showing that communication between Iran and the Chinese media needs to be strengthened. Regarding the reports on the impact of the two major newsletters on the "Belt and Road" initiative, except for the two articles expressing a neutral position, they all agree and support



the initiative.

#### **4. Factors Influencing Iran's Perception of the "Belt and Road" Initiative**

##### **4.1 Iran's Mentality of being a Great Power and the Mentality of Victims**

Jervis believes that history is an important source of cognition for decision makers, but due to the subjectivity of decision makers, the application of historical experience is not so profound, leading to false cognition (Jervis, 2017). He proposed that the historical analogy of decision makers would become a burden due to human cognitive limitations, which would have a misleading effect, and would forcefully link some substantially different real and historical events together, resulting in major perceptual errors.

The Iranians once established the world's earliest empire, the Persian Empire, and created a splendid civilization. However, after entering modern times, it has continued to decline and suffered aggression from



Western powers. In modern times, Iran has been colonized by Britain and Russia, and its sovereignty has been severely violated. After Iran discovered oil resources, Western countries even launched fierce competition for it. After World War II, Iran and Saudi Arabia became the two major allies of the United States to maintain its influence in the Middle East. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran finally embarked on an independent development path. However, due to its revolutionary leader Khomeini's foreign policy of "no East, no West, only Islam", it fell into a situation of isolation in the international community.

The history of Iran includes the glorious history of the Persian Empire, as well as the history of foreign invasions and modern humiliation. The consequences of its political psychology are the two cognitive, emotional and attitude modes of the mentality of a great power and the psychology of the victims, which are manifested as pride and humiliation. The national psychology of

pride and self-confidence, the cognitive characteristics of being overly sensitive to external threats and exaggerating threats, the negative emotions and attitudes toward power, and the psychological characteristics of identification and sympathy for the weak who resist the power (Jin, 2011). Iran's position and attitude on issues involving nuclear disputes and the international system are, to a large extent, an external manifestation of its special national psychology.

Since China first proposed the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013, Iran, as a major Silk Road country, has shown strong interest in it, because Iran itself played an important role on the ancient Silk Road. This initiative has awakened Iran's Historical memory. However, due to the two completely different mental models of Iran's mentality of a major power and the mentality of victims, Iran's perception of the "Belt and Road" initiative is divergent.

## 4.2 Iran's Position on the Ancient Silk Road



Historically, the exchange between Iran and China began in the late 2nd century BC. On the Silk Road, the two civilizations opened a long history of exchanges. Iranians mainly play the role of intermediary in East-West trade. In addition to trade exchanges, Manichaeism and Persian music have also entered China, and many Chinese arts have also entered Iran, which has promoted the economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries. The ties between the two countries were particularly close in the 13th century, when the Mongol Empire ruled most of the Eurasian continent. However, since the 15th century, the land route of the Silk Road gradually lost its advantage and was replaced by maritime trade routes. This shift pushed Iran to the brink of global trade.

The “Belt and Road” initiative can restore Iran’s historical status as a bridge between East and West. Among the six corridors of the “Belt and Road” initiative, one passes through Iran, which helps Iran to restore its

historical position in global trade to a certain extent. In addition, this initiative is considered a strategic opportunity for Iran's economy and development. Due to the long-term sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran, it is difficult for Iran to absorb foreign funds, the domestic economy is sluggish, and the people's lives are difficult. Iran must accelerate its economic development to meet the needs of the domestic people in production and life and maintain social stability.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran's share of global trade has been greatly reduced due to long-term international sanctions. China is one of Iran's important options for attracting international funds to promote economic development. China is the most important buyer of Iranian oil, accounting for about one-third of Iranian oil exports. China's huge demand for energy has led to the establishment of close economic ties with Iran. China is not only a major importer of Iranian energy, but also a major export market for Iranian non-oil



commodities. In 2016, about 21% of Iran's total exports were sold to the Chinese market, and about 30% of Iran's total foreign trade was conducted with Beijing.

Under the "One Belt One Road" initiative, energy and infrastructure investment are important areas of cooperation between China and countries along the route. China has always been one of Iran's major foreign investors. China's investment involves various sectors ranging from energy to transportation. China has invested in a number of energy projects in Iran, including the South Pars gas field and the Abadan refinery.

### **4.3 The Role of "One Belt One Road"**

The "Belt and Road" initiative is an important driving force for Iran to improve its geopolitical and economic status. Under the liberal international order led by the United States, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and other countries have been subject to the most severe international sanctions for many years, and their freedom of movement internationally has also been restricted.

Therefore, Iran's participation in the "Belt and Road" initiative can use its cooperation with China to accelerate economic development while actively integrating into the international community.

Iran has connections with Central and South Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The aforementioned regions, especially South Asia and the Middle East, are among the poorest and unstable regions in the world. For example, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with a total population of approximately 220 million, have slow economic development and lack of social stability. For decades, these two countries have not received any substantial external investment, which is one of the reasons for their underdevelopment. The economic backwardness and social unrest in Afghanistan have led to a large number of refugees fleeing to Iran, making Iran one of the countries with the largest number of refugees in the world. In addition, due to its weak national governance capabilities, Afghanistan has become an



important center for drug production and trade.

The “Belt and Road” initiative helps reduce poverty and instability in the surrounding areas of Iran. In recent years, China has become the most important investor and major trading partner of Iran’s neighboring countries. First, China is an important trading partner and investor in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Second, China is an important energy partner of the Gulf countries. Finally, through the “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” plan, China has promoted Pakistan’s economic development and social stability.

## **5. Policy Recommendations to Deepen Iran’s benign Awareness of the “Belt and Road” Initiative**

### **5.1 Pay Attention to the Study of Iran’s Internal Affairs**

There are two forces in the Iranian political circle, reformers and conservatives, and the two sides have different political opinions and policies. The reformers are pro-Western, while the conservatives advocate “looking



eastward". The two factions compete fiercely to seize power from the government, resulting in political instability in Iran.

From 1997 to 2005, reformist Khatami served as president. Khatami advocates dialogue among civilizations internationally, and develops the domestic economy by strengthening ties with the international community. However, during his tenure, Khatami suffered strong opposition from conservatives, the West gave up its support, and the split within the reformists. The reformers headed by Khatami ultimately failed to achieve their expected goals.

From 2005 to 2013, Ahmadinejad, who was a conservative, became the president of Iran. After Ahmadinejad came to power, he vigorously confronted Western countries headed by the United States and pursued a policy of "looking eastward", which aroused strong dissatisfaction among reformers. Ahmadinejad's break with the West led to Iran's isolation in the



international community, and therefore affected his reputation in Iran's political and religious circles, and even Khamenei expressed dissatisfaction with him. Therefore, the reformists took this opportunity to impeach Ahmadinejad, causing political chaos in Iran. Eventually, the reformists headed by Rouhani came to power in 2013 and began to adjust the foreign policy of Ahmadinejad's period and vigorously develop the domestic economy.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the political situation in Iran has been in a state of instability due to the mutual intrusion between reformers and conservatives. The changes in Iran's domestic political power have had an important impact on its foreign policy. Although the reformists coming to power will strengthen cooperation with Western countries such as Europe, it does not mean that they will oppose cooperation with China. Conservatives' strong repulsion of the West will cause Iran to suffer international sanctions and create

certain obstacles to the cooperation between China and Iran.

The political stability of Iran needs to be consolidated by the development of the domestic economy. Rouhani has worked hard to reconcile with the international community since he came to power, and finally reached the Iran nuclear agreement in 2016, laying a good external environment for Iran's economic development. At the same time, Iran's participation in the "Belt and Road" initiative will also help attract Chinese investment and cooperate in the construction of infrastructure, which has a huge boost to Iran's economy. For China, any political faction is welcome as long as it maintains Iran's political stability and promotes economic development. China should strengthen its observation and research on Iran's political situation in order to further develop cooperation with Iran, and at the same time lay a foundation for Iran to develop a good understanding of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative.



## 5.2 Enhancing Awareness of Iranian Society

Iran is a diverse society, so we must understand Iranian society from multiple angles. Regardless of internal affairs or diplomacy, there are obvious differences in the opinions of all sectors of Iranian society. With voters paying more and more attention to presidential and parliamentary elections, Iran's existing social differences may rise to the height of the country's political development. This requires us to grasp Iranian information from multiple levels and perspectives. This is one of the key factors for the success of China's Iraq policy. If only relying on a single source of information to formulate a policy toward Iran, China's Iranian diplomacy may be difficult to proceed smoothly.

The will of the people plays an important role in determining the direction of Iran's development, so special attention must be paid to the ideological tendencies of the Iranian people. First, Iran's (Persian) national spirit is very prominent. The Iranian people are

national rejuvenation and national rise. China should pay more attention to the symbol of Iran before the Islamic era, which can win more friendly rewards from Iran.

## 6. Conclusion

As a major country in the Middle East, Iran's awareness of the "Belt and Road" initiative can reflect the overall perception of the Middle East countries to a certain extent. In response to Iran's different perceptions of the "Belt and Road" initiative, China should take measures to strengthen the benign perceptions of Middle Eastern countries.

First, China should strengthen public diplomacy. With the outbreak of drastic changes in the Middle East in 2011, important changes have taken place in the situation in the Middle East. China should enrich and innovate diplomatic concepts and methods on the basis of consolidating the original government diplomacy and head diplomacy. China has strengthened its public diplomacy. By providing international public products to



Middle Eastern countries, it not only spreads China's good image, but also helps to enhance the people's good perception of China in the Middle East. For example, China's dispatch of medical teams, agricultural experts, and sports coaches to Middle Eastern countries has played an important role in promoting local economic and social development.

Second, China should strengthen international dissemination of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Since the 21st century, with the rise of the Internet, international communication, including traditional media and new media, has played a major role in international relations. However, China's international communication effectiveness with Middle Eastern countries is still low, and the awareness and influence of various communication channels in Middle Eastern countries are generally not high. Based on the above analysis of reports on the "Belt and Road" initiative by the media of Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, it can be seen that the main sources of news reports in the

Middle Eastern countries, it not only spreads China's good image, but also helps to enhance the people's good perception of China in the Middle East. For example, China's dispatch of medical teams, agricultural experts, and sports coaches to Middle Eastern countries has played an important role in promoting local economic and social development.

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three countries are still Western countries represented by Europe and the United States, and they do not pay enough attention to China's information sources. "Speak early, speak more, and explain the vernacular" put forward by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying is an important reference for strengthening China's international communication in the Middle East. "Speaking early" means that China should pay attention to timeliness when targeting international communications in the Middle East, seize news reports as soon as possible, and avoid being disadvantaged in the Western-dominated international public opinion environment. "Talking more" means that China's international communication must be repeated through multiple channels and different media to increase the influence of communication. "Explain the vernacular" means that China must fully consider the information needs of different groups such as the political, academic, and non-governmental communities in the Middle East, and strengthen the docking of



discourse in different contexts.

Third, master the means and methods of cross-cultural communication, and adjust the method of communication according to the audience. First, there are different countries, sects and ethnic groups in the Middle East, and they have different expectations and positions on the "Belt and Road" initiative. China should strengthen cooperation with regional powers and countries friendly to China, give full play to the regional advantages of these countries, and strengthen strategic communication in the Middle East. Second, when China promotes the "Belt and Road" initiative to Middle Eastern countries, it should focus on young audiences. The "Arab Spring" movement that broke out in the Middle East in 2011 was the linkage of young people in the region through new media, which led to regime changes in many countries, demonstrating the important role of young groups. China's communication in the Middle East has long paid attention to elite groups such



as academics and political circles, and has not paid enough attention to non-governmental groups mainly composed of young audiences. Finally, China and Middle Eastern countries belong to different cultural systems. In order to prevent errors in communication, effective communication paths should be established to be close to the cultural identity, ideology and behavior of the target country, and to understand and meet the needs of local audiences.

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