



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Iranian Studies Unit Third Annual Conference

# Iran's Look East Policy

6-7 September 2023

[About the Conference](#) | [Timetable](#) | [Participants](#) | [Abstracts](#) | [Moderators](#)





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# About the Conference

The Iranian Studies Unit of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will hold its third annual conference from 6-7 September 2023. The topic of this year's conference is "Iran's Look East Policy."

In recent years, with the rise of the conservative forces in all branches of government, the "Look East" policy has become more prominent in Iran's foreign policy. Although the Eastern strategy has its roots in the Ahmadinejad administration's endeavor to connect with the countries of the global south, President Raisi, perhaps more than any of his predecessors, has pushed to establish deeper ties with the East. In Raisi's conception, Iran's relations with all parts of the world other than Europe and North America fall under the broad umbrella of its "Look East" policy. As part of this policy, in addition to sustained attention to Africa and Latin America, bilateral relations between Iran, China, and Russia are progressing at an unprecedented scale, with all parties attempting to further develop their economic cooperation and to consolidate relations. Iran and China signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement in March 2021, and shortly afterward, Iran and Russia attempted to renew and extend their 20-year agreement, which expired around the same time. Iran has also become a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The two-day conference will explore the origins, implications, challenges, and opportunities of Iran's "Look East" policy, as well as Iranian and other perspectives on the Islamic Republic's international relations with countries to its geographic east and in the global south more broadly.

Conference participants include, Rowena Abdul Razak, Cyrus Ashayeri, Omar Ashour, Niloufar Baghernia, Gawdat Bahgat, Abdolrasool Divsallar, Aicha Elbasri, Mohamad Hamas ElMasry, Karim Eslamloueyan, Jonathan Fulton, Diana Galeeva, Olivia Glombitza, Hessam Habibi Doroh, Ayat Hamdan, Jianwei Han, Harith Hasan, Javad Heiran-Nia, Shireen Hunter, Marwan Kabalan, Emad Kaddorah, Mehran Kamrava, Zahra Karimi, Sarvenaz Khanmohammadi, Banafsheh Keynoush, Mazaher Koruzhde, Nikolay Kozhanov, Eric Lob, Mahmood Monshipouri, Kadhim Hashim Niama, Huda Raouf, Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, Deepika Saraswat, Li-Chen Sim, Bayram Sinkaya, Degang Sun, Steven Wright, and Chuchu Zhang.

# Timetable

# Day 1, Wednesday, 6 September 2023

9:30-10:00	<b>Registration</b>
10:00-10:15	<b>Opening Remarks</b> <b>Speaker</b> Mehran Kamrava
10:15-11:15	<b>Keynote Lecture</b> <b>A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Iran's Interaction with the East</b> Moderator: Mehran Kamrava <b>Speaker</b> Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour
11:15-11:30	Coffee Break
11:30-12:30	<b>Panel 1: Iran's Look East Policy</b> Moderator: Mohamad Hamas ElMasry Diana Galeeva: Iran's "Look East" Policy and the Emerging New World Order Olivia Glombitza: The Islamic Republic of Iran's Approach to the East: Symbolic Politics and Popular Culture in Iran's Foreign Policy Kadhim Hashim Niama: Strategy, Ideology, Pragmatism, and Tactics in Iran's "Look East" Policy
12:30-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:00	<b>Panel 2: Iran's Look East Policy and the Arab World</b> Moderator: Marwan Kabalan Harith Hasan: "Pivot to the East" in Iraq: The Iranian influence and the Chinese Alternative Huda Raouf: Egypt's Response to Iranian Foreign Policy and Calls for Rapprochement
15:00-15:15	Coffee Break



<p><b>15:15-16:15</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 3: Iran-Russia</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Nikolay Kozhanov</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Li-Chen Sim:</b> The Russian Challenge to Iran's Look East Policy <b>Abdolrasool Divsallar :</b> The Perception of Russia in Iran's Military-Industrial Complexes <b>Eric Lob* and Mazaher Koruzhde*:</b> A Risk-Seeking Iran: Explaining Iran's Military Support for Russia in the Ukraine War</p>
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\* Attending online

- **Timing of panels is based on Doha local time (GMT +3).**

## Day 2, Thursday, 7 September 2023

<p>9:00-10:15</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 4: Iran-China</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Aicha Elbasri</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Jonathan Fulton:</b> China and Iran: Partners in Revisionism</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Niloufar Baghernia:</b> China's Position in Iran's Look East Policy: Neoclassical Realist Perspectives</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Degang Sun and Sarvenaz Khanmohammadi:</b> The China-Iran 25-year Strategic Agreement and the Strategic Rebalance of the Gulf</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Jianwei Han:</b> China's Cognition and Response to Iran's "Look East" Policy: An Explanation of Partner-Community Framework</p>
<p>10:15-10:30</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Coffee Break</p>
<p>10:30-11:30</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 5: Iran, India, Malaysia</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Steven Wright</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Chuchu Zhang:</b> China and India as Rising Asian Transactionalist Players in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iran</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deepika Saraswat:</b> From Bilateralism to Regionalism: Transformation of Iran's 'Look East' Policy under Raisi</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Rowena Abdul Razak:</b> Consistency Through Instability: Malaysian-Iranian Relations from the Pahlavis to the Islamic Republic</p>
<p>11:30-11:45</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Coffee Break</p>
<p>11:45-13:00</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 6: Iran, Central Asia, South Caucasus</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Omar Ashour</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Banafsheh Keynoush:</b> Conflicts in Iran's Northern Corridors: National Security, Regional Order, and Implications for its Look East Policy</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Bayram Sinkaya:</b> Iran – Azerbaijan Relations under the Shadow of Pan-Turkist Challenges</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Hessam Habibi Doroh:</b> Iran-Turkmenistan Relations: Geostrategic Dynamics under the New Regional Order</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Gawdat Bahgat:</b> Iran and the South Caucasus</p>

13:00-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:00	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 7: Economy, Sanctions, Trade, Energy Sector</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Ayat Hamdan</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Zahra Karimi:</b> The Impact of Iran's Turn towards the East on Its Economic Performance</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Karim Eslamloueyan:</b> The Effects of Sanctions, Complexity, and World Trade Uncertainty on the Trade Relationship Between Iran and Major Asian Countries</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cyrus Ashayeri:</b> How Can Iran Learn from Sustainable Energy Initiatives in ASEAN?</p>
15:00-15:15	Coffee Break
15:15-16:15	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Panel 8: Look East Policy Risks and Challenges</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Moderator: Emad Kaddorah</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mahmood Monshipouri*</b> and <b>Javad Heiran-Nia:</b> Counterbalancing the West: The Risks of Iran's Eastern Policy</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Shireen Hunter*:</b> Why Has Iran's "Look East" Policy Failed?</p>
16:15-16:30	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Closing Remarks</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Speaker</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mehran Kamrava</b></p>

\* Attending online

- **Timing of panels is based on Doha local time (GMT +3).**



# **Participants**

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# **Abstracts**



## Rowena Abdul Razak

Rowena Abdul Razak is a guest teacher at the Department of International History, LSE. She holds a DPhil in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford where she explored the British-Soviet occupation of Iran during the Second World War. She has written on Arab nationalism in Bahrain, the Iranian Left, and the Iranian oil industry. In addition to her project on Malaysian-Iranian relations, she is working on her first book on the early Cold War in Iran. Abdul Razak will start a lectureship in Cold War history at Queen Mary, University of London in September 2023.

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### Consistency Through Instability: Malaysian-Iranian Relations from the Pahlavis to the Islamic Republic

During the devastating war with Iraq, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati made a trip to Malaysia. This visit to the Southeast Asian country revealed Iran's reliance on smaller nations during times of crisis. While attention has been given to Iran's relations with more prominent Asian nations such as China and India, Tehran's modern ties with Malaysia is less known despite interactions between the Malay peninsula and Persia going back centuries. Since independence, Malaysia has sought ties with Iran and vice versa. Since the Pahlavi era, relations were strengthened through state visits and information exchange, with a smooth transition of bilateral ties after the 1979 revolution. Malaysia has been an important focal point for Iranian presidents, in terms of trade and as an example of a working relationship with a pro-Western Muslim country. Facing sanctions and a strained international reputation, the relationship represents a sense of normality to Tehran. This paper explores the crossing points in the international outlooks of Malaysia and Iran, while offering a different perspective to Iran's foreign relations. Rooted in history, this research scrutinises the role of Malaysian and Iranian politicians and explains how ties have remained relatively stable despite Shi'i-Sunni tensions and external pressures.



**Cyrus Ashayeri**

Cyrus Ashayeri is Principal Technologist at Beyond Limits. Ashayeri holds a PhD in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Southern California. His professional career includes engineering projects at the National Iranian Oil Company and energy security projects in Washington, DC. Aside from his technical work, Ashayeri has a number of publications on policy and environmental aspects of the energy sector.

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### **How Can Iran Learn from Sustainable Energy Initiatives in ASEAN?**

Despite having the world's largest combined hydrocarbon reserves, Iran faces considerable energy security risks. These risks stem from a lack of diversification in energy sources, inefficient energy consumption, and limited investment in energy efficiency and renewables. Iran's current energy trajectory has significant global implications for climate change. As Iran transitions from its traditional role as a major hydrocarbon-exporting country, the need for a reformed energy policy becomes increasingly apparent. This paper suggests that, under a "Look East" policy framework, Iran can enhance its energy security by learning from sustainable energy practices in ASEAN countries. Known for their rapid energy demand growth and sustainable strategies, these countries serve as more feasible models for Iran than Western nations or countries like China, Russia, and India. It examines four ASEAN case studies: Vietnam's new wind and solar capacities, Thailand's energy efficiency initiatives, Singapore's smart city projects, and the transformative role of national oil companies, focusing particularly on Malaysia. The paper concludes that cooperation with ASEAN could significantly improve Iran's energy security, given ASEAN's history of successful regional energy transition collaboration and their success in securing support, from policy to finance and technology, from a diverse range of international players with different geopolitical objectives.



**Niloufar Baghernia**

Niloufar Baghernia is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, the Australian National University (ANU). Her research interests include International Relations, and countries such as Iran and China (China-Middle East). Baghernia has published peer-reviewed articles in journals such as *Asian Politics and Policy* and *The International Quarterly of Geopolitics*. Currently, she serves as a guest researcher at the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies in Iran and a sessional tutor at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies and the ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences.

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### **China's Position in Iran's Look East Policy: Neoclassical Realist Perspectives**

Iran's "Look East Policy" drew the world's attention to Tehran's shifting foreign policy since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005. The Islamic Republic's "Neither East nor West" policy has been altered to the Look East policy, shifting its focus to non-Western powers. In doing so, Tehran has aimed to enhance ties with Beijing, which led Iran to sign the 25-year agreement with China. With the onset of Ebrahim Raisi's presidency, improving ties with China has further become Tehran's foreign policy priority. As such, this paper explores Ebrahim Raisi's shift toward China by addressing the following key question: Why has Iran pursued a more profound shift toward China during Raisi's presidency? The paper argues that although domestic affairs have affected Iran's shift toward China, the structure of the international system and the Middle East have been more influential in Iran's foreign policy preferences. China's rise, followed by its perception of possible changes against the United States and the balance of power alterations in favour of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, have pushed Iran more toward China. This consistent behaviour of Iran might continue regardless of any reconciliation with the West if the structural pressures persist.





**Gawdat Bahgat**

Gawdat Bahgat is a Professor of national security at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, DC. He is the author of 12 books on the Middle East, US foreign policy, and energy security.

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### **Iran and the South Caucasus**

This study examines Iran's relations with the major powers in the South Caucasus – Armenia and Azerbaijan – as well as Israel, Turkey, Russia, and Western powers (the United States and the European Union). Having borne the weight of heavy US sanctions since 1979 and locked in an intense strategic rivalry with some of its Arab neighbours for much of the past few decades, the Islamic Republic is under pressure from ideological, strategic, and economic needs to "Look East." The study argues that the standoff with Western powers over the nuclear program and extensive sanctions have limited the options Iran can pursue to advance its national interests in the south Caucasus (and elsewhere). Second, like any country, Iran's foreign policy is driven by both ideology and perceived national interests. In the South Caucasus, Tehran has shown a remarkable degree of pragmatism.



## Abdolrasool Divsallar

Abdolrasool Divsallar is a Visiting Professor at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan and a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, focusing on defence and strategic studies, regional security reform, and non-proliferation issues. His research also focuses on Middle East security, Iran's military and foreign affairs, Russia-Iran relations, and Gulf security dynamics. Divsallar has written and edited eight books, including *Stepping Away from the Abyss: A Gradual Approach Towards a New Security System in the Persian Gulf* (EUI, 2021), and published numerous peer-reviewed papers and journal articles. His upcoming book titled *Struggle for Alliance: Russia and Iran in the Era of War in Ukraine* will be published by I.B. Tauris/ Bloomsbury.

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### The Perception of Russia in Iran's Military-Industrial Complexes

What is the perception of Russia inside Iranian military-industrial complexes? How do military-industrial complexes influence Tehran's decisions on Russia? Understanding the perception of Iran's military-industrial complexes is important because of their critical position in the Islamic Republic's decision-making towards Russia. This paper argues that the dominant perception of Russia inside Iranian military-industrial complexes fundamentally differs from what publicly revealed disputes imply. Iranian military-industrial complexes view Moscow as a military partner that has consistently supported Iran's defence sector since the 1990s. The perception of Russia inside Iran's defence sector is positive and has transformed it into one of the major advocates of a stronger partnership with Moscow. At least four narratives about Russia can be identified in Iranian military-industrial complexes: Russia as an arms supplier; Russia as a technology provider; Russia as a source of doctrinal inspiration; and Russia as a supporter of Iran's military doctrine – all of which view Moscow as standing with Iran and supporting the country's state security. These positive views have successfully thwarted and softened the impact of public opinion on Iran's decision making toward Russia, with publicly revealed disputes proving an inaccurate measure of the Iranian defence sector's perception of Russia.



## Karim Eslamloueyan

Karim Eslamloueyan is a Professor of Economics at Shiraz University, Iran. He received his PhD in Economics from Ottawa University, Canada. His research interests include Macroeconomics, International Economics, and Islamic Economics. Eslamloueyan mainly focuses on energy-rich countries and the Middle East and Asian economies. He has published 70 research articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *Energy Policy*, *Economic Modelling*, *Emerging Markets Finance and Trade*, *Economic Analysis and Policy*, and *China Economic Review*. Eslamloueyan has published a book on advanced Macroeconomics with an Islamic perspective, 17 book chapters, and conference papers.

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### **The Effects of Sanctions, Complexity, and World Trade Uncertainty on the Trade Relationship Between Iran and Major Asian Countries**

Different factors impact Iran's shift toward Asian countries. The literature lacks research on key economic determinates of Iran's "Look East" policy. By developing an autoregressive distributed lag analysis of cointegration, this study examines the effects of sanctions, economic complexity, world trade uncertainty, economic growth, and COVID-19 on Asia's share in Iran's trade. More specifically, the paper focuses on Iran's tradeties with South and East Asian counties, which comprise 15 of Iran's main trade partners. The estimation results indicate that economic sanctions raise Asia's share in Iran's trade. Moreover, an improvement in the Iran-specific economic complexity index lowers the share of Asia in Iran's total trade. Additionally, the paper finds that in an uncertain trade world, the risk of Iran's trade with the West increases, raising Asia's trade with Iran. The COVID-19 crisis also reduced Asia's share in Iran's total trade. The hostility between Iran and the West and the harsh Western sanctions have left no choice for Iran but to boost its economic relationship with the East. However, while the Iran-West conflict embedded in economic sanctions only speeds up Iran's tilt toward the East, it is not the only driving force for its "Look East" policy.



**Jonathan Fulton**

Jonathan Fulton is an Associate Professor of Political Science in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and a non-resident senior fellow with Middle East Programs and the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council. An expert on Chinese policy toward the Middle East, he has written widely on the topic for both academic and popular publications. His books include *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (Routledge, 2020), *External Power and the Gulf Monarchies* (Routledge, 2020), *Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative* (Routledge, 2022), *Routledge Handbook of China-Middle East Relations* (Routledge, 2023), and *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security* (Routledge, 2022). He has published over 30 journal articles, book chapters, and reports, and dozens of op-eds and analytical pieces.

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## **China and Iran: Partners in Revisionism**

The China-Iran bilateral relationship is constantly under intense scrutiny, and developments in recent years have heightened this. The formalisation of the comprehensive strategic partnership in March 2021 after five years of stalled progress fed into the perception of a stronger political, economic, and security alignment. President Raisi's state visit to Beijing in February 2023 – the first from an Iranian president in twenty years – was quickly followed by the dramatic announcement of the Iran-Saudi diplomatic breakthrough, announced in China. This added to the widespread belief in greater coordination between Beijing and Tehran. Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July 2023 was yet another signal of an intensifying bilateral relationship. Taken together, the two countries appear to be edging closer. However, in material terms the consequences of this remain marginal, especially when compared with China's ties to Iran's Arab neighbours in the Gulf. Sino-Iranian trade remains low, Chinese investments are minor, and Chinese state-owned enterprises have not been active in contracting since the latest rounds of US sanctions were imposed on Iran. If the material side of the relationship is relatively insignificant, the normative side tells a different story. Both China and Iran are deeply dissatisfied with the existing international order and share a commitment to a less western-centered order. Recent Chinese proposals such as the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative all underscore Beijing's belief that it has arrived as a global power with its own preferences for re-ordering at the systemic level. This is consistent with Iran's preferences for order transition within its own region. This presentation will examine the normative underpinnings of the Sino-Iranian partnership and what this means for order, both in the Gulf and beyond.



**Diana Galeeva**

Diana Galeeva is an Academic Visitor at University of Oxford, and a Non-Resident Fellow with the Gulf International Forum. Galeeva completed her bachelor at Kazan Federal University, Russia, she holds an MA from Exeter University and PhD from Durham University. Galeeva is the author of *Qatar: The Practice of Rented Power* (Routledge, 2022) and *Russia and the GCC: The Case of Tatarstan's Paradiplomacy* (I.B. Tauris/ Bloomsbury, 2022). She is also a co-editor of *Post-Brexit Europe and UK: Policy Challenges Towards Iran and the GCC States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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## Iran's "Look East" Policy and the Emerging New World Order

The fundamental transformations of the world order that have been kick-started by the Ukraine war, including the rebalancing of power, alignments and policies, have also strengthened the significance of the widespread "Look East" policy among various states. Iran's attitude has been echoed by announcements from China and Russia that they will "set an example of a responsible world power and play a leading role," which is often interpreted as seeking to reduce economic interdependence with the West, and specifically to redirect energy deals from the West towards the East. Politically, the policy has contributed to the expansion of bloc-to-bloc cooperation among non-Western countries, especially between the BRICS nations and the SCO. This paper addresses a difficult but crucial analysis: how Iran's collaboration with (especially) China and Russia under the "Look East" policy challenges the "liberal world order," and how a new world order may emerge from these alliances. It approaches this by discussing current and probable Eastern alignments and their major developments through common ground in politics, economics, and governance. Within this, the role and influence of Iran is particularly important, and we must understand what "Looking East" means – and will mean – for this vital regional power.



**Olivia Glombitza**

Olivia Glombitza is an Adjunct Professor of International Relations at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), both in Barcelona, Spain. She is a fellow for the project "Reconfiguration of Transnational Actors & Elites in the MENA Region", based at UAB, and the project "Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianization" (SEPAD) based at Lancaster University, UK. Her research is situated at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy and focuses on relations of power, ideology and identity and symbolic politics more broadly, but particularly in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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### **The Islamic Republic of Iran's Approach to the East: Symbolic Politics and Popular Culture in Iran's Foreign Policy**

While still largely isolated by countries of the Global North, the Islamic Republic of Iran is entertaining ever expanding relations with countries of the Global South. The paper examines the ways in which the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to build bridges with its neighbours to the "East," such as Iraq and Pakistan and argues that the Islamic Republic of Iran supplements its foreign policies with symbolic politics that aim at building and strengthening ties based on a common ideational foundation and worldview. These strategies go beyond mere engagement at the government level to address the local population. For the purposes of fomenting social ties in tandem with political relations, expressions of popular culture such as translated versions of the Iranian government induced song 'Salam Farmandeh' into Arabic and Urdu are a case in point. Approached from a constructivist perspective, the paper draws on theories and concepts of communication and cultural studies, as well as studies of international relations. The paper analyses the song's visual and textual discourse and the role of cultural anchors such as symbols, values, rituals, and heroes and their potential to elicit pathos or emotional engagement to appeal to the hearts of the Islamic Republic's neighbours.



## Hessam Habibi Doroh

Hessam Habibi Doroh is a Lecturer and Researcher in Islamic Studies, and course coordinator at the University of Applied Sciences, FH Campus, Vienna. He teaches courses on International Relations, intercultural and interreligious studies. He is currently working on his PhD project at the University of Public Service in Budapest. His field of interest are culture and society in contemporary Iran and International Relations of the Middle East. Doroh is the author of *Sunni Communities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2013-2021* (Brill Publisher, 2023).

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### Iran-Turkmenistan Relations: Geostrategic Dynamics under the New Regional Order

The relations between Iran and Turkmenistan are complex, characterized by cooperation and competition. This paper investigates the geostrategic aspect of these relations in light of Iran's "Look East" policy. It traces the evolution of Iran's relations with Turkmenistan and outlines the main geopolitical and geoeconomic elements of the relationship. The paper also looks at the geo-security dimension of the relations, focusing on the importance of border security. The long, shared border of these two countries has created the need for close cooperation on Iran's regional geopolitical objectives. The article discusses how the changing regional dynamics, including the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran's cooperation with Russia and China, and the renewal of Iran's relations with the Gulf countries, provide opportunities for Iran to increase cooperation with Turkmenistan. However, the challenge of transforming this relationship into a deeper partnership depends on security imperatives. The purpose of this paper is to explore two things. First, it seeks to understand how states behave. Second, it aims to reveal the underlying rationale of Iran's security policy toward Turkmenistan, in order to better understand Iran's broader security approach in its Look East policy under new regional dynamics.



**Jianwei Han**

Jianwei Han is an Associate Professor and Director of the Iranian Studies program at the Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University. Her research interests include the modernization process of Iran, the digital economy in the Middle east, and China's diplomacy on the Middle East. She has published more than 20 articles in Chinese and English journals. Han has presided and finished one of the China's National Social Science Projects and published a book titled *The Economic Modernization of Islamic Republic of Iran* (2019).

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## **China's Cognition and Response to Iran's "Look East" Policy: An Explanation of Partner-Community Framework**

This paper tries to use the method of partner-community framework to analyse China's cognition and response to Iran's "Look East" policy. The objective is to understand the relations between China and Iran from China's diplomacy perspective, especially beyond the theory of alliance. Partner and community are the two critical concepts in China's diplomacy. Partner means friend or collaborator, and non-alignment without targeting a third party. Building a community with a shared future is regarded as the highest goal of China's diplomacy. The idea of the community reflects the peaceful communication idea of China's diplomacy. Partnership is a major way to realise the community. China believes that Iran's "Look East" policy is the result of the sanctions and unfair treatment by the West and is inspired by China's diplomacy of treating Iran as an equal partner, with "Look East" conducive to safeguarding China's interests as well as building a neighbourhood community order. In addition, China hopes that an Eastward looking Iran should be a responsible power to ensure regional peace. China has also brought Iran's rival, Saudi Arabia, into the partner-community framework and brokered the reconciliation between the two countries.





**Harith Hasan**

Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, where his research focuses on Iraq, identity politics, religious actors, and state-society relations. He holds a PhD in political science from Sant’Anna School for Advanced Studies in Pisa, Italy and an MA in political communication from the University of Leeds. Prior to joining Carnegie, he was a senior research fellow at the Central European University, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council where he led their Iraq Program, and a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University.

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### **“Pivot to the East” in Iraq: The Iranian influence and the Chinese Alternative**

This presentation discusses how the “pivot to the East” has become part of the political and intellectual debate in Iraq, and how is it influenced by Iranian policy. Linking Iraq to China emerged in recent years as a key talking point adopted by Shia groups allied with Iran, and it has been presented both as an alternative path to development and as a necessary step to distance Iraq from the West, the US in particular. Increasingly, it has taken an “ideological” character and began to influence internal politics. The presentation also explains obstacles that face this pivot, and the nature of geostrategic and economic interests that contextualize it. It emphasizes the dynamics of Iraq-Iran relations today and their impact on this matter. Furthermore, it explores the Chinese presence in Iraq and how it complements – while also competes with – Iranian interests.



**Javad Heiran-Nia**

Javad Heiran-Nia is the Director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies in Iran. He is the Current Affairs Analyst at Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum. His articles have appeared in the Atlantic Council, Stimson Center, *National Interest*, *Middle East Policy*, Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum, *Insight Turkey*, *Iran and the Caucasus Journal*, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, *Strategic Analysis*, and LobeLog.

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## **Counterbalancing the West: The Risks of Iran's Eastern Policy**

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran's foreign policy of negotiating its interests by balancing the East versus the West has gradually shifted toward the former. China and Russia have exploited Iran's isolation, largely a result of ongoing US sanctions, by looking for ways to challenge frayed US-Iran ties. The US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 under the Trump administration further reinforced this shift. Iran has increasingly become a key participant in a network of alliances built by Beijing to counterbalance US hegemony. Iran regards the Belt and Road Initiative as a sign of China's growing economic and geopolitical power. Tehran's view of strengthening its relations with Moscow, however, is based on an entirely different consideration – largely aimed at doubling down on its military ties with Russia. We argue that there are multiple risks associated with Iran's "Look East" policy. Iran's claim to have a special place in China's geo-economic orbit is overblown if not fundamentally misguided, and Iran's economic and political ties with China are unlikely to serve as a saviour against its isolation by the West. China's "positive balance" approach toward all countries in the Middle East, as well as its extensive trade ties with the West, are integral to its foreign policy. Insofar as Russia is concerned, Tehran's Eastern policy likely risks deepening its dependency on Moscow, a possibility that would significantly compromise Iran's national interests. Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate that the risks involved with turning to the East should not be underestimated.



**Shireen Hunter**

Shireen Hunter is an Honorary fellow at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, with which she has been affiliated since 2005 as a visiting fellow, visiting Professor, and Research Professor. Prior to that, Hunter was the Director of Islam Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), with which she had been associated since 1983. She is the author and editor of 30 books and monographs and hundreds of journal articles and book chapters.

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### **Why Has Iran's "Look East" Policy Failed?**

Iran first initiated its strategy of turning to the East nearly two decades ago. A principal reason for this shift in Iran's foreign policy orientation from its declared strategy of "Neither East, nor West, only Islamic Republic" was the West's rebuff of its overtures between 1989 to 2005 under presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. Then came the imposition of harsh sanctions by the Obama and Trump administrations. Yet, between 2013 and 2017, Iran still pursued a policy of reaching out to the West under President Hassan Rouhani. The result was the signing of the JCPOA which seemed to resolve Iran's nuclear dossier. But, when Donald Trump tore up the agreement in 2018, Iran took a more determined shift towards the East. It expanded relations with Russia and China. But Iran's Eastward strategy has not yielded the results and Tehran has hoped for, neither in economic nor political-security terms. Many economic, geographical, and historical factors have been responsible for this lack of results. But the most important barrier has been Iran's fraught relations with the US and the US sanctions. None of major powers in Asia, nor Russia, despite their own problems with Washington, have wanted to further antagonize it by helping Tehran.



**Zahra Karimi**

Zahra Karimi is an Associate Professor at University of Mazandaran, Iran. Her areas of expertise include development economics, institutional economics, and the labour market. Karimi has taught at the University of Sunderland, UK, and National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan. She is a member of Economists for Full Employment; Global Labour University; and the Gender and Macroeconomics Working Group. Her publications include: "The Effects of International Trade on Gender Inequality in Iran"; "The Effects of Afghan Immigrants on the Iranian Labour Market"; "The Role of Credit in Women's Employment"; "The Case of Women's Cooperatives in Iran"; and "Iran's Labour Market Under the Sanctions".

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### **The Impact of Iran's Turn towards the East on Its Economic Performance**

Before the 1979 revolution, the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany were the biggest trading partners of Iran. Iran imported high-tech machinery and equipment from advanced Western countries. Occupation of the US embassy in November 1979 marked the beginning of a long series of international sanctions against Iran. Tehran consequently decided to expand its economic and political relations with countries such as China, Russia, and India. Neighbouring countries, especially the UAE and Turkey, became the informal passages for indirect trade with Western countries. Since 2012, harsh sanctions related to Iran's nuclear activities have created severe obstacles for Iran's trade with the Western countries. Iran's trade is highly concentrated on Eastern developing countries. To examine the impacts of Iran's orientation towards the East on its economy, in addition to using data published by formal domestic and international institutions, the paper uses a survey conducted among Iranian entrepreneurs and businesspersons with the collaboration of the Iran Chamber of Commerce. The results of the study show that Iran's economy suffered considerably from the Eastward turn and Iranian people will face increasing hardship if the policy is not changed.



### **Sarvenaz Khanmohammadi**

Sarvenaz Khanmohammadi is a Lecturer and Researcher based in Guangzhou, China. She holds a bachelor's degree in business from Shahid Beheshti University, and a master's in international relations from Shanghai International Studies University. Currently, she works as a Persian teacher in Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, and her main focus of research includes Sino-Iranian relations and international politics.

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### **The China-Iran 25-year Strategic Agreement and the Strategic Rebalance of the Gulf**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the international political and economic system has changed dramatically. The Western and non-Western Asian and Eurasian powers are engaged in a relentless strategic rivalry. The three-century-long Western dominated international system is giving way to a mixed system in which the Global North and the Global South play simultaneously predominant roles. In the face of the changing international system, China and Iran are promoting strategic docking, and their relations have been upgraded from a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 to the 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement in 2021. Meanwhile, the China-Arab strategic partnership has been promoted since the first China-Arab summit was held in Riyadh in December 2022. Mediated by China, Iran-Saudi reconciliation and their engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has promoted Beijing's political influence in the Gulf and has diluted the US-led anti-Iranian coalition in the Middle East.



## Banafsheh Keynoush

Banafsheh Keynoush is a Scholar at the Middle East Institute, fellow at the Sectarianism and De-Sectarianism Project, and formerly visiting scholar at Princeton University. She is the co-author of *The States of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Abraham Accords* (Lexington Press, forthcoming 2023); author of *The World Powers and Iran: Before, During and After the Nuclear Deal* (Palgrave, 2022), and *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?* (Palgrave 2016); editor of *Iran's Interregional Dynamics in the Near East* (Peter Lang 2021); and author of the book-length report *Revolutionary Iran's Africa Policy* (KFCRIS 2020).

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### Conflicts in Iran's Northern Corridors: National Security, Regional Order, and Implications for its "Look East" Policy

The war in Ukraine and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict have affected Iran along its increasingly fragmented northern borders. These borders connect Tehran to the South Caucasus through Azerbaijan and Armenia, and through Ukraine to Eastern Europe. Tehran has failed to pay full attention to the conflicts along its northern borders while trying to rebuild ties with the West since the breakdown of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Consequently, its "Look East" policy designed to advance security by balancing ties with the East and West has suffered, despite the country having a symbiotic relationship with Armenia, an indispensable partnership with Russia, economic and ideational links with Azerbaijan, and diplomatic ties with Ukraine. Responding to the festering border tensions to its north, Tehran's non-aligned policy projects impartiality albeit with mixed results due to non-neutral Iranian policies to influence its northern neighbours. But turning the northern corridor conflicts into opportunities requires strategic calculations that Iran has yet to develop. But the absence of a much needed "Look North" doctrine to complement the Iranian "Look East" policy, has resulted in major foreign policy setbacks for Iran.



## Mazaher Koruzhde

Mazaher Koruzhde is a Lecturer of international relations at Howard University. He uses a critical political economy perspective to analyse US foreign policy in the Gulf. His recent article published in *Class, Race and Corporate Power* titled "The Iranian Crisis of the 1970s-1980s and the Formation of the Transnational Investment Bloc" examines the contribution of the Iranian revolution, hostage crisis, and war with Iraq to the formation of the US-Saudi Transnational Investment Bloc in the late 1970s.

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### A Risk-Seeking Iran: Explaining Iran's Military Support for Russia in the Ukraine War

This paper examines the geopolitical implications of social unrest and external pressure in Iran over the last decade. It argues that recurring protests, economic sanctions, and other pressures inside and outside of Iran have made it more risk-seeking in pursuing its geopolitical goals of gaining concessions from the US and its allies and partners in Western Europe and the Middle East and the Gulf. The paper uses prospect theory to explain how the 2009 Green Movement protests contributed to Iran's perception of operating in the "domain of loss." Consequently, Iran became more risk-acceptant and escalated its conflict with the US and Israel. This conflict caused Iran to initially confront the harshest sanctions in its history and subsequently sign the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Between 2017 and 2022, intensified waves of protests, combined with the US maximum pressure campaign, followed the same pattern and spawned similar geopolitical developments, including an Eastward foreign policy and military assistance to Russia in Ukraine. Time will tell whether the Western powers overcome their reluctance to re-engage Iran, a geopolitical challenger whose main motivation for risk-seeking behaviour is regime survival.



**Eric Lob**

Eric Lob is an Associate Professor of politics and international relations at Florida International University. He is a Non-Resident Scholar with the Middle East Institute Iran Program and a Board of Trustees member of the American Institute of Iranian Studies. He is the author of *Iran's Reconstruction Jihad: Rural Development and Regime Consolidation after 1979* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). His articles have appeared in *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Iranian Studies*, *Middle East Critique*, *The Middle East Journal*, *The Muslim World*, *Third World Quarterly*, and others.

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### **A Risk-Seeking Iran: Explaining Iran's Military Support for Russia in the Ukraine War**

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## Mahmood Monshipouri

Mahmood Monshipouri is a Professor of International Relations at San Francisco State University and a lecturer at Global Studies/International and Area Studies at UC-Berkeley. Monshipouri is the editor, most recently, of *Why Human Rights Still Matter in Contemporary Global Affairs* (New York: Routledge, 2020), and the author of *Middle East Politics: Changing Dynamics* (New York: Routledge, 2019). His latest book is titled: *In the Shadow of Mistrust: The Geopolitics and Diplomacy of the US-Iran Relations* (London: Hurst, 2022).

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### Counterbalancing the West: The Risks of Iran's Eastern Policy

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran's foreign policy of negotiating its interests by balancing the East versus the West has gradually shifted toward the former. China and Russia have exploited Iran's isolation, largely a result of ongoing US sanctions, by looking for ways to challenge frayed US-Iran ties. The US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 under the Trump administration further reinforced this shift. Iran has increasingly become a key participant in a network of alliances built by Beijing to counterbalance US hegemony. Iran regards the Belt and Road Initiative as a sign of China's growing economic and geopolitical power. Tehran's view of strengthening its relations with Moscow, however, is based on an entirely different consideration – largely aimed at doubling down on its military ties with Russia. We argue that there are multiple risks associated with Iran's "Look East" policy. Iran's claim to have a special place in China's geo-economic orbit is overblown if not fundamentally misguided, and Iran's economic and political ties with China are unlikely to serve as a saviour against its isolation by the West. China's "positive balance" approach toward all countries in the Middle East, as well as its extensive trade ties with the West, are integral to its foreign policy. Insofar as Russia is concerned, Tehran's Eastern policy likely risks deepening its dependency on Moscow, a possibility that would significantly compromise Iran's national interests. Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate that the risks involved with turning to the East should not be underestimated.



### **Kadhim Hashim Niama**

Kadhim Hashim Niama is a Professor of Strategy and Political Science at Baghdad University. He previously served as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of International Studies, Head of the Center for International Studies at the University of Baghdad, Strategic and Regional Studies at Al-Bakr University in Libya. He holds an MA and PhD from the University of Wales School of International Politics and Strategy, Aberystwyth. He has published many books and studies on international relations.

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### **Strategy, Ideology, Pragmatism, and Tactics in Iran's "Look East" Policy**

The study explores the Eastward looking policy pursued by the main powers in the Gulf and the Middle East, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Iraq. In the region, Iran has taken the most clear and significant approach towards the East in terms of action, horizons, implementation, and overt promotion in political and media discourse and academic debate. The paper adopts a neo-realist approach to analyse central questions: What has prompted Iran to take this approach? Is it guided by ideology or pragmatism? Is this merely a reaction or does it have a strategy? How is it governed in policy? What are the repercussions of this approach domestically, regionally, and internationally? The study takes criticisms of the policy into account and argues that it is controlled by a dynamic process between motives and other pull factors. The policy takes shape at the local Iranian level, within the Gulf-Middle East political environment, and in the context of interactions in the international system. The study discusses its ideological dimensions and their share in the decision-making process, which it argues are the weakest factor. Instead, strategy is the main driver, whereby the "Look East" policy cannot be attributed to an emotional reaction, but whether or not this strategy is clearly defined, official and sustainable is an ongoing topic in academic debate. The study presents the merits and downfalls of the "Look East" policy, arguing that it will likely continue, and, despite the difficulty in predicting its outcome, that it is the most effective option for managing Iranian foreign policy.



**Huda Raouf**

Huda Raouf is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Politics and Economics – New Giza University, and a researcher specializing in Iranian and regional affairs. She is also the head of the Iranian Studies Unit, a member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, a member of the Economics and Political Science Committee of the Supreme Council of Culture, and a research fellow at the International and National Security Research Institute (INIS). She has several studies on Iranian internal and external affairs, Gulf security, and Egyptian foreign policy.

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### **Egypt's Response to Iranian Foreign Policy and Calls for Rapprochement**

Recently, Iranians have been calling for several Arab countries to improve bilateral relations with Iran within the framework of Raisi's "neighbourhood diplomacy" policy, which he seeks to make the most important achievement of his government. Because foreign policy is dictated by domestic determinants, the paper is focused on two themes. The first explores internal Iranian motives for pursuing neighbourhood diplomacy, and the regional and international context that both helps and hinders its success. The second reviews Egyptian-Iranian relations as a model for Iran's endeavour to benefit from a regional détente, and specifically the Egyptian response to these attempts. Since the signing of the Saudi-Iranian agreement under the auspices of China on 10 March 2022, which Iran hopes will serve as the basis for a new geopolitical reality in the Middle East, questions have arisen about the impact of the agreement on the relationship between Iran and Egypt. Iranian officials, including Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Nasser Kanaani, spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Ministry, have repeatedly stressed the importance of rapprochement with Egypt, and of the relationship between the two countries. Taking into account the expected shifts in regional alliances, Egypt's constant assertion that Gulf security is part of Arab national security, and in light of the recent developments with Iran, the study examines the future of Egyptian-Iranian relations.



## **Seyyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour**

### **Keynote Speaker**

Professor of International Relations at the School of International Relations, Iran, and an advisor to the Iranian Foreign Minister. He is also a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Iran, where he previously served as the President of the institute. Sajjadpour was the Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations. He received his PhD in political science from George Washington University and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University.



**Deepika Saraswat**

Deepika Saraswat is an Associate Fellow at the West Asia Center, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Saraswat has a PhD in Political Geography from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Previously, she was a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA). Her research focuses on Iran's foreign policy and geopolitical developments in West Asia and Eurasia, and Indian foreign policy. She is the author of *Between Survival and Status: The Counter-hegemonic Geopolitics of Iran* (ICWA & Macmillan: 2022).

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## **From Bilateralism to Regionalism: Transformation of Iran's 'Look East' Policy under Raisi**

In the wake of the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, and the return of the US unilateral sanctions, the then Rouhani administration framed Iran's outreach to China and Russia in terms of defending multilateralism against US unilateralism. Under the Raisi administration, especially following the approval of Iran's SCO membership at Samarkand summit in 2021, Iran's "Look East" policy was increasingly framed in terms of participating in Asian regionalism/continentalism and "Asian multilateralism". The paper maps the transformation in Iran's Look East policy, firstly by analysing Iran's increasing focus on multilateralism since the Rouhani administration's negotiation of an interim nuclear deal in the first year of his government in 2013, and how it transformed into "Asian multilateralism" under Raisi. Secondly, it examines Iran's idea of regionalism, focusing on three aspects: (1) Iran's notion of Asia as comprising of diverse civilisations, and articulation of "new Asian identity" based on the exclusion of the West; (2) Common, indivisible security concept, and development-security nexus at the regional level; (3) Utilising Iran's geographical/location advantage, while projecting Iran as a "bridge" linking different regions, and connectivity initiatives. Thirdly, it briefly examines how Iran's vision of regional integration has re-contextualised India-Iran relations, creating both new challenges and possibilities of convergence.



**Li-Chen Sim**

Li-Chen Sim is an Assistant Professor at Khalifa University in the United Arab Emirates and a non-resident scholar at the US Middle East Institute. She is a specialist on Russian and Gulf energy and its intersection with international relations. Her interests include the political economy of hydrocarbon and renewable energy in the Middle East, Gulf-Asia exchanges, and Russia-Middle East interactions. Her most recent publications include *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security* (Routledge, 2023), *Low Carbon Energy in the Middle East and North Africa* (Palgrave 2021), and *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies* (Routledge, 2018).

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### **The Russian Challenge to Iran's Look East Policy**

Iran's "Look East" policy appears to complement Russia's own "Pivot to the East". Colourful monikers used to describe relations between them (and China in some cases) include the Legion of Doom, Axis of Tyranny, Axis of the Sanctioned, and Club of Tyrants. Moreover, in the latest iteration of its Foreign Policy Concept released in March 2023, Russia lists China and India as the country's top allies while the Asia-focused Shanghai Cooperation Organization is highlighted as a significant international grouping. This paper takes a deep dive into Russian-Iranian economic relations to examine the extent to which Moscow contributes to Iran's "Look East" orientation. It analyses the sub-areas of commodity exports, transportation routes, and engagement with Central Asia. The paper finds that for Iran, Moscow functions more as a challenger than facilitator. It concludes that Iran may be prepared to put up with this state of affairs because the longer-term strategic value of cooperation with Russia justifies the economic challenges that Moscow poses.



**Bayram Sinkaya**

Bayram Sinkaya is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University. He received his PhD at the Middle East Technical University (METU), where he also worked as a research assistant (2002-2011). He was a visiting researcher at Columbia University (2007-2008) and Tehran University (2003). He also served as a non-resident research fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, for Iranian affairs between 2014-2017. His academic interests include Iranian politics, foreign and security policies of Iran, Middle East politics and Turkish foreign policy. He is the author of *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (Routledge, 2015).

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## **Iran – Azerbaijan Relations under the Shadow of Pan-Turkist Challenges**

Outcomes of the second Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia that broke out in September 2020 have dramatically shaken geopolitics of the South Caucasus to the detriment of Islamic Republic of Iran. First, the victorious Republic of Azerbaijan has replaced its cautious approach to Tehran with a more assertive foreign policy. Second, Azerbaijan deepened its alliance with Türkiye. Third, the Moscow Declaration of November 10, 2020, that ended armed clashes between the belligerents paved the way for establishing a land "corridor"— Zangezur – connecting Türkiye to the Caspian Sea, and then to the Turkic states in Central Asia. Moreover, in the last decade, Türkiye under the leadership of President Erdoğan has strived for cultivating economic, cultural, and political ties with the Turkic states, which is crowned with the formation of the Organization of Turkic states in November 2021. Finally, recent developments emboldened the flourishing nationalist movements among the Iranian Azerbaijanis in the northwest of country. Combined, the recent developments are perceived among the Iranian elite as a new wave of Pan-Turkist challenge. Iranian perceptions of, and responses to the so-called Pan-Turkist challenge will be effective in the future of the regional security complex in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. In this respect, Iran's relations with Azerbaijan will be pivotal, and will illustrate Iranian strategy with regard to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Consequently, this paper traces the evolution of Tehran-Baku relations after the second Karabakh war.



**Degang Sun**

Degang Sun is a Professor of Political Science at the Institute of International Studies, Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. He is the Vice President of Chinese Association of Middle East Studies. He was a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (2018-2019), Senior Associate Member at St Antony's College, Oxford University, and an Academic Visitor to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (2012-2013), Denver University (2007-2008) and the University of Hong Kong (2004-2005). His research interests are Middle Eastern politics and international relations; great powers' strategies in the Middle East; and China's Middle East diplomacy.

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### **The China-Iran 25-year Strategic Agreement and the Strategic Rebalance of the Gulf**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the international political and economic system has changed dramatically. The Western and non-Western Asian and Eurasian powers are engaged in a relentless strategic rivalry. The three-century-long Western dominated international system is giving way to a mixed system in which the Global North and the Global South play simultaneously predominant roles. In the face of the changing international system, China and Iran are promoting strategic docking, and their relations have been upgraded from a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016 to the 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement in 2021. Meanwhile, the China-Arab strategic partnership has been promoted since the first China-Arab summit was held in Riyadh in December 2022. Mediated by China, Iran-Saudi reconciliation and their engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has promoted Beijing's political influence in the Gulf and has diluted the US-led anti-Iranian coalition in the Middle East.





**Chuchu Zhang**

Chuchu Zhang is an Associate Professor at School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, China. She holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies from Cambridge University, UK. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern politics, China-Middle Eastern relations, and China's foreign policy. She is the author of *Islamist Party Mobilization: Tunisia's Ennahda and Algeria's HMS Compared, 1989-2014* (Palgrave, 2020). She has published in a number of peer-reviewed journals including *Mediterranean Politics*, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, *Middle East Policy*, *Environment and Planning: Economy and Space*, *Globalizations*, and *Pacific Focus*.

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## **China and India as Rising Asian Transactionalist Players in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iran**

This article analyses the evolution of China and India's involvement in the Middle East, and what it means to the region's geopolitical landscape. Utilising the transactionalist behaviour theory, it argues that the rising Asian powers follow different trajectories in the Middle East from those of the conventional established powers led by the US. Instead of following well-designed scripts, these new players' role making and role performance in the region serve immediate, non-systematic goals, and focus on short-term benefits. This research conducts a case study of the two Asian powerhouses' interactions with Iran. It shows that China is now in a more advantageous position compared with India due to the mass resources it masters. So far, neither Beijing nor New Delhi are interested in playing catch-up with each other or with the US. Yet, the regional actors' increasing reception of ad-hoc, mutual transactions with their new Asian benefactors regardless of common values and long-term commitment diversifies the region's landscape, which guarantees that China and India will always find a role to play.

## Moderators

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**Omar Ashour**

Omar Ashour is a Professor of Security and Military Studies and the Founding Chair of the Critical Security Studies Programme at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He is the Director of the Strategic Studies Unit at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies. Professor Ashour specialises in small state defence; combat and military effectiveness; military adaptations, innovations, and transformations by state and nonstate armed actors; asymmetric, conventional, irregular and hybrid warfare; weapon systems analysis; counterinsurgency and counterterrorism; and collective de-radicalization. He is the author of *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (Routledge, 2009) and *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021) and the editor of *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalisation of Armed Movements* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021). His current research project is focused on “Comparative Combat Effectiveness and Ukraine’s Regular and Irregular Armed Forces (2014-2022).”

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**Aicha Elbasri**

Aicha Elbasri is a Researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. Elbasri is a former UN official and has held various media and communications positions in the Department of Public Information in New York, the United Nations Development Programme in Sudan, and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. Elbasri was the spokesperson for the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur and a regional advisor in the UN Population Fund in Cairo. She received her PhD in French Literature from the Université de Savoie in France. Elbasri has published numerous peer-reviewed papers in addition to a book titled *L’Imaginaire Carcéral de Jean Genet, l’Harmattan*, 1999.

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**Mohamad Hamas ElMasry**

Mohamad Hamas ElMasry is a Professor of Media Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. Elmasry received his PhD in Mass Communication from the University of Iowa, where he was a Presidential Fellow. Elmasry’s research on Arab media systems, news coverage of race, and the media and terrorism has appeared in reputable refereed publications, including *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism Studies*, *International Communication Gazette*, and the *International Journal of Communication*. He has also written for *Al-Jazeera English*, *the Middle East Eye*, *The New Arab*, *Muftah*, and *Jadaliyya*, and appeared on *Al-Jazeera*, *CNN*, *BBC World News*, and other networks.



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Ayat Hamdan is a Researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and Editor-in-Chief of the historical studies journal *Ostour*. She received a PhD from the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, where she worked as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Political Science. She was also awarded a Visiting Researcher fellowship at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, UK.



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Emad Kaddorah is a Researcher and Head of the Editing Department at the ACRPS. He holds a PhD in International Relations and Middle East Studies and an MA in Defense and Strategic Studies. He has published several peer-reviewed articles and books, including *Turkish Foreign Policy: Orientations, Flexible Alliances, Power Politics* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2021); *The Rise of the GCC States and Turkey: Convergent and Divergent Regional Agendas* (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021). His research interests focus on Geopolitics, International Relations, the Gulf and Turkish Studies.



**Mehran Kamrava**

Mehran Kamrava is Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar. He also directs the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. Kamrava is the author of a number of journal articles and books, including, most recently, *A Dynastic History of Iran: From the Qajars to the Pahlavis* (2022); *Triumph and Despair: In Search of Iran's Islamic Republic* (2022); *A Concise History of Revolution* (2020); *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (2018); *Inside the Arab State* (2018); *The Impossibility of Palestine: History, Geography, and the Road Ahead* (2016); and, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (2015).



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Nikolay Kozhanov is a Research Associate Professor at the Gulf Studies Center of Qatar University. He is also a non-resident scholar at Program on Economics and Energy at the Middle East Institute (Washington DC). His research interests are focused on the geopolitics of Gulf hydrocarbons and Iran's economy. He holds a PhD in economics from St Petersburg State University (2010).



**Steven Wright**

Steven Wright is an Associate Professor of International Relations and an Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Hamad bin Khalifa University. His research focuses on the international relations and political economy of the Arab Gulf states, as well as global energy geopolitics. He has spoken at events hosted by organizations such as the World Bank and NATO and advised several governments and multinational corporations. He received his PhD in International Relations from the University of Durham.