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Xi Jinping's Operational Code in the Field of Foreign Policy; Strategic Requirements for the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Extended Abstract

The central research question of this study is: How does Xi Jinping's operational code shape China's foreign policy orientation, particularly toward the Islamic Republic of Iran? The article advanced the hypothesis that Xi Jinping's operational code is neither aimed at overthrowing the liberal international order nor based on direct ideological confrontation with the United States. Rather, it reflects a gradual and pragmatic effort to expand China's power, influence, and strategic autonomy within the existing international system through the selective use of international institutions, rules, and mechanisms. This approach enables China to compete with the United States while avoiding costly, full-scale confrontation and to calibrate its relations with countries such as Iran primarily on the basis of national interests and cost-benefit calculations.

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The findings of the study support this hypothesis. They indicate that Xi Jinping perceives the political environment as predominantly cooperative and consistently attributes cooperative intentions to other actors. At the same time, he believes that a profound historical transformation is underway in international relations and that China is capable of playing an active role in shaping this transformation. However, his score on this dimension is relatively moderate, suggesting that he does not regard historical developments as highly predictable. Furthermore, in dealing with international conflicts, Xi demonstrates a clear preference for peaceful settlement, while victory, stalemate, and surrender rank respectively as secondary options.

Based on the operational code profile of Xi Jinping, the characteristics associated with his leadership style, and the historical evolution, opportunities, and challenges of Iran–China relations, several strategic implications for Iran’s policy toward China can be identified.

First, it appears that China studies in Iran have often been shaped more by conventional assumptions than by rigorous empirical analysis. A widespread perception among many Iranian foreign policy elites is that China seeks to dismantle the liberal international order and that the Middle East constitutes a central pillar of this strategy. The present study, however, demonstrates that Xi Jinping’s personality profile is characterized by a preference for compromise and negotiated solutions rather than direct confrontation with the United States. Developments on the ground likewise support this conclusion. China has consistently sought to manage its strategic competition with the United States while avoiding direct conflict. Consequently, China’s Middle East policy—and, by extension, its policy toward Iran—should be understood as a function of its broader global strategy. Equally important, the Middle East occupies a lower strategic priority in Chinese foreign policy than China’s immediate neighborhood in the Asia-Pacific and even Central Asia.

Another important finding emerging from Xi Jinping’s personality profile, which reinforces the previous point, is his preference for avoiding tension. In the Middle East, and particularly with regard to Iran, China generally opposes escalatory policies and prioritizes the preservation of state stability. This helps explain why Beijing simultaneously supported the government of Bashar al-As-

sad in Syria while also backing the government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in Yemen. In essence, irrespective of the ideological orientation of governments, China seeks to cooperate with and support established state authorities whenever possible. Iran should therefore recognize that China is unlikely to become involved in situations that Beijing perceives as unnecessarily escalatory. China's balancing strategy in the Middle East—including its simultaneous engagement with Tehran and Riyadh prior to the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries—can also be understood within this broader framework.

At the same time, China's critique of the anarchic nature of the international system may create important opportunities for Iran. In pursuit of a more favorable international order and the maximization of its national interests, China has adopted a strategy of gradual institutional transformation. This strategy has involved establishing non-Western institutions while simultaneously seeking a greater role within long-standing international organizations. Such developments provide Iran with opportunities to expand cooperation with China through these institutional frameworks. Moreover, the convergence between Chinese initiatives—including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the "Go West" strategy—and Iran's "Look East" policy offers additional prospects for strengthening bilateral relations.

Xi Jinping's belief in the strategic importance of non-military sources of power, reflected in his concept of comprehensive security, represents another important opportunity for Iran. Xi adopts a holistic understanding of security that extends beyond military considerations. As discussed earlier, Chinese policymakers regard development as the foundation of security, which explains the central role of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Development Initiative. This perspective provides a strong basis for expanding developmental cooperation between Tehran and Beijing. Furthermore, given China's acute security concerns regarding ethnic terrorism in its northwestern provinces and Iran's experience in confronting similar threats, the two countries also possess significant potential for cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of assigning greater strategic priority to the Look East policy and a broader Asia-oriented approach in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the principal weaknesses of Iran's Look East policy has been its largely instrumental and secondary character. Rather than being pursued as a long-term strategic orientation, engagement with Asia has frequently been employed as a means of balancing against the West. This approach has not only constrained and fragmented Iran's relations with Asian countries but has also increased the likelihood of Iran becoming a bargaining instrument in the strategic calculations of other powers. Accordingly, a stronger commitment to multilateralism, improved relations with a wider range of major powers, and the adoption of a hedging strategy would reduce the risk of falling into such a strategic trap.

Key words: Xi Jinping, Operational Code Analysis, Islamic Republic of Iran, China, Foreign Policy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.