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## **The Role of Public Opinion in Changing Iran's Strategy in the Belt and Road Initiative and Turning Politics to the East**

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### **Abstract:**

Public policy is the main function of government; The most important issue in public policy-making is the support of the people for policies that create, recreate, strengthen and sustain the legitimacy and support of the government. Public opinion is one of the pillars influencing public policy. The media, civic organizations, university professors, political and social activists, and journalists represent public opinion. The elites in these groups influence the policy-making process by presenting the problems and demands of the people, proposing solutions, making decisions and participating in policy choices, evaluating policies and their effects. The subject of this article is to examine the impact of elites in changing Iran's strategy in the China belt and road initiative Plan. The Comprehensive 25-Year Strategic Partnership Agreement between Iran and China and the extensive participation in the belt and road initiative are seen as turning Iran's policy eastward. The main question of the article is what is the opinion of political and social elites on Iran's strategy in the belt and road initiative? How do they evaluate Iran's policy in this plan? From the point of view of public policy, what effect did the elites have on the rotation of Iranian policy to the east and the adoption of a strategy of active participation in the belt and road initiative? In answer to the above questions and other possible questions, the hypothesis of the article is that the opinion of social elites is in line with the strategy of developing Iran's interactions with the East and active presence in the belt and road initiative. The reaction of the elites as a representation of public opinion and its impact on the government's decision to change the strategy in the belt and road initiative plan is explained in

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the framework of the Defender Coalition theory. Findings of the research were obtained through surveys, detailed interviews and limited questionnaires.

**Keywords:** Public policy-making, Public Opinion, Elites, Belt and Road Initiative, Iran and China.

## Introduction

Public opinion is defined as the sum of the opinions, points of view, and tendencies of a large section of society about an issue at a given time. The use of this word dates back to the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, it was used to express the thoughts of the French elite towards the king, and after the revolution, it became common to mean the opinions of all people (elites and the general public) (Naqibzadeh, 2009: p. 228). Parties, professional politicians, members of the legislature, civil society organizations, the media, journalists and educational institutions are the main sources of public opinion.

In policy-making sciences, which are part of the movement to rationalize human life and rationalize human action, public opinion is a key part (Ashtarian, 2007: p. 15). Rousseau, the father of modern public opinion, believed that all laws were based on public opinion. For Abraham Lincoln, public opinion is everything. Its existence is the reason for the success of government officials and without it, no policy will succeed (Dadgaran, 2010: p. 21). Alfred Levy considers public opinion to be the esoteric conscience of a nation and a political force. According to Parsons, the position of public opinion in the political market is the same as the position of the consumer in the economic market (Parsons, 2006: p. 17). The views and beliefs of the general public influence political decision-making (Bashiriyeh, 2006: p. 409). Public opinion determines the power of governments and political systems in Iran (Soltanifar, 2014). And the press and media have a

decisive role in shaping public opinion (Jahangiri, 2019).

However, the influence of public opinion is different according to the role that political systems play for public opinion (Kamali and Ghafouri, 2010: p. 188). However, the government and the owners of capital, due to having more human and financial capacities to create dominant narratives and in line with their goals, play a dominant role in the management of public opinion (Karimi and Ghafari, 2019: p. 166); However, in the stage of cognition in the process of public policy, public problems, government organizations, parties, influence groups and civic institutions are designed and published through the press and media (Kamali, 2016: p. 139). The possibility of public discussion is a condition for the emergence of public opinion and promotion and negotiation is one of the key issues in publicizing issues and disseminating it at the level of officials and people (Rezaei, and Et al, 2018: p. 155).

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative was announced in 2013. So far, more than 130 countries and 30 international organizations have joined; And various projects in the field of transportation and transit infrastructure, including power transmission lines, highways, railways, high-speed rail lines, sea and land ports, airports and docks, are underway in the countries of the belt-road route. Iran reacted positively to it from the very beginning. With the visit of the President of China to Iran in 2016, the signing of 17 memoranda of understanding and the declaration of rea-

diness of the two countries to cooperate, the issue was widely reflected in the region and the world; But by the end of 2018, no specific action had been taken to indicate a strategy for the plan. Since the end of that year, with the drafting of a 25-year cooperation document between Iran and China on the focus of the belt and road initiative, we have witnessed a change in Iran's serious approach to this plan.

According to analysts and political and economic experts, considering the geopolitical, geoeconomics and geo-strategic position of Iran and being in the direction of the main land and sea corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative; Iran's strong presence in the plan and gaining a better position to enjoy its advantages is a rational action in accordance with national interests. But how is Iran's policy towards the Belt and Road Initiative evaluated in public opinion? What is the approach of the elites as a micro-reflection of public opinion towards Iran's active participation or non-participation (tendency or divergence) in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative? In the opinion of public opinion, does the government's strategy in the Belt and Road Initiative guarantee national interests, strengthen Iran's regional and international position?

What is the right strategy for the elite? From the point of view of political and economic elites, what obstacles and challenges will Iran face in participating in the project? What is the proposed solution of the elites to get out of the bottlenecks? In the face of the above questions, the hypothesis of the article is the positive tendency of public opinion to Iran's creative and active participation in this international project. The findings of the article are in line with this view and confirm the above hypothesis.

From the end of 1397, Iran adopted a new strategy towards the Belt and Road Initiative,

which according to analysts is called Iran's political turn to the east (Torkan, 1399). But this strategy is ambiguous in the eyes of the elite and needs more transparency and enlightenment. The purpose of this article is to investigate the effect of the attitude of elites (public opinion) in shaping the strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative Plan. Although it is not possible to accurately measure the influence of public opinion on policy choices; However, the extent of the reflection of the issue in public opinion, it's becoming an issue and the opening of space for criticism and discussion about it by the government, shows the importance of public opinion in decision-making, decision-making, strategy and public policy of governments.

### Research background

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's 2013 proposal to expand the economic and social ties of Asia, Europe and Africa through the development of land and sea infrastructure. With the realization of this plan, economic interactions are placed in a network of regional and trans-regional dependencies and connections. According to Beijing strategists, Iran is a central element of this plan. Iran is both a target country and an important player in the Belt and Road Initiative (Shah Mohammadi, 2014: p. 124).

During a visit to Iran in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's readiness to cooperate in these areas; Road construction, railways, the sea and the Internet, the creation of the East-West Asia crossing, the facilitation of trade and investment along this road, and cooperation in the fields of energy resources and industry (Xi Jinping, 2015: p. 1). Also, Yang Sen, the Chinese Ambassador to Iran, wrote: Iran has always been one of the main crossings and trade cen-

ters on the Silk Road and is now one of the important partners in the construction of a road and a belt; The cooperation between China and Iran in the framework of a road and a belt, reflects the principles of explicit consultation and common interests that have strengthened the interactions and familiarity between the two nations and has deepened the trust and support of both parties. (Yang Sen, 2017) And given Chinese companies' contracts with Iran worth more than \$ 5 billion, the design of a belt and a road opens a new chapter in Sino-Iranian cooperation (Yang Sen, 2017). Chinese analyst Jincheng believes China's plan is a great economic platform. A number of projects involve the joining of trains between East China and Iran that may expand to Europe (Tian Jincheng, 2016: p. 6).

According to some Iranian experts, Iran is one of the main destinations of the Silk Road economic belt and one of the goals of large investments made in other countries is access to Iran and has a special place in this project. (Khodagholipour, 2017: p. 39) Because it is both an energy passage in the Middle East and has a sea or land border with 15 countries (Salimi Borujeni, 2016). Need for oil and gas; Strategic dimension and route security; Investment and trade; Transportation and transit are mentioned as reasons for Iran's importance. In addition, Iran is important to China in terms of economics, route security, geopolitical weight shift and regional balance, competition, and the neutralization of US hegemony in the region.

Iran's approach was to welcome the Chinese plan and announce its readiness to cooperate; And announced at the first conference of the Cooperation Assembly of the member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017; This plan can lead to more solidarity between countries. Iran also welcomes the

Belt and Road Initiative (Tayebnia, May 2017). China has invested in three main projects to implement the Economic Belt and Silk Road Initiative in Iran; 1- Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high-speed railway 2- Chery industrial complex 3- Chabahar port (Yazdani and Et al, 2016: p. 175). However, despite the willingness of the two countries to cooperate, no significant project has been defined so far, and the strategy of the country's transportation and transit sector in relation to the road-belt is ambiguous. And Tehran-Beijing relations, despite increasing trade and economic relations, still lack lasting links and components. (Shariati and Pour Najafi, 2015: p. 161). And in fact, there are still no structures in place to take advantage of major agreements, such as the Silk Road strategy in the country, and the setting up of platforms that can best serve the national interests of the country. (Zare, 2018 / IRAS).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Public policy theories have shifted from government to government. In the new approach, knowledge, rationality and economic attitude are central to the public policy process. The most obvious manifestation of rationality in decision-making is in terms of cost-benefit equation and proportionality of goals with methods and defining goals based on internal advantages and capabilities of society and in fact, the possibility of implementing decisions and flexibility of policies in accordance with facts. (Gharib, 2011: pp. 3-101)

Numerous approaches to public policy-making, including institution-based, behavior-oriented, and multilateral theories, have been studied; And each, in accordance with the goals, has put components at the center of the theory. The approach of political coalitions (advocacy coalitions) is a framework for addressing the policy process in difficult

situations; They are characterized by fundamental conflicts over the goal, important technical conflicts and numerous actors from different levels (Sabatier, 2014: p. 351). According to this theory, policy change and policy are affected by two issues: 1- External turbulence that causes a kind of shock to the subsystem; And 2- Learning policy-oriented. The range of change ranges from policy tools, goals and approaches to institutions and stakeholders. According to this theory, unforeseen factors (crises, accidents, etc.); Internal factor in the subsystem (change in power structure and policy makers), external factor (international interactions, war, etc.); Learning policies (policy feedback, problem solving methods, innovation and new technology, etc.) and changing the discourse (public understanding) of policies, changes in paradigm, attitude and mentality are among the factors of policy change.

The theory of the sponsor coalition begins with three fundamental foundations; Macro level (government) - policy system specialists; Intermediate level - subsystem actors within the coalition; And the micro-level of public opinion. These foundations affect dependent variables, belief change, and policy through policy-oriented learning and external turbulence. Understanding the policy process requires knowledge of the goals and perceptions of the actors that are relevant to the subject from the legal, scientific, policy and performance dimensions. The researcher must add researchers and journalists to a set of potentially understanding policy actors (Sabatier, 2014: p. 21). In fact, achieving a comprehensive understanding requires examining the issue from different perspectives and perspectives.

One of the three cornerstones of the advocacy coalition approach is the micro level - the social psychology of the people or public

opinion. Public opinion is a mirror of social will and a platform for policy learners. Public opinion, by evaluating policies, expressing the expectations and aspirations of the people, reflecting on problems and proposing solutions, turn politicians to social realities and assist in the adoption of strategy and policy choices, and play a key role in the application of rationality in policy making. It is necessary to assess public opinion in terms of examining the legitimacy and acceptability of government policies, evaluating the decision-making process and stakeholder participation in the decision-making process and its impact on learning the policy-oriented tool of policy makers, changing beliefs, forming a supporting coalition and finally changing strategies and policies. Political and social elites are the most obvious examples of public opinion.

#### **Research methodology**

In conducting the research, descriptive-analytical method, survey in the form of qualitative interview (detailed interview) and a limited questionnaire were used. Qualitative interview (structured interview) is useful for finding data that can be statistically analyzed. The quality of a quality interview is to enter into the depth of the interviewee's thoughts and feelings through a long and detailed conversation. The interviewer finds the issues step by step from the interviewee's point of view by asking various and more inquisitive questions, with the answers he receives. The advantage of this method is a more complete understanding of the meaning of the statements of an informed person in the context in which the events in question took place. In addition to meaning and content, recording details, which can clarify many issues, is one of the advantages of this method (Al-Kajbaf, 2015: pp. 2-41).

The survey method is important in research in terms of awareness of policy legitimacy, policies approval, adopting the best decision, intellectual participation of policymakers, guaranteeing national interests, executive support and continuity of policies. A survey or survey research is in two ways: descriptive and explanatory or compilation of both. In the descriptive method, only events or behaviors are examined: what happened? What was its behavior? What does it do? But in the explanatory method, the why and the cause of the behavior are considered: Why did something special happen? What causes it? In fact, the result of explanatory research is enlightening results that can be evaluated for decision making. In this research, a combination of explanatory and descriptive methods was used.

Thus, the collective opinion of researchers, university professors, media activists, executives, experts and stakeholders were obtained. Responsive knowledge of the belt-road plan and Iran's actions and the desire to talk and express views were necessary and sufficient conditions in the poll process, and considering the various aspects of the plan, the following questions were considered as the focus of the poll.

1. The level of awareness responsive to the new Silk Road. (China Belt and Road Initiative)

2. The nature of the belt and road initiative: economic, political and security, scientific, cultural and social, geopolitical and ...?

tific, cultural and social, geopolitical and ...?

3. China's central goal or goals in the Belt and Road Initiative?

4. Iran's position in the belt and road initiative?

5. The impact of the implementation of the plan on public policy, especially in the transportation sector, given the geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic situation of Iran and the prominent position of transportation and transit in the belt and road initiative?

6. The most appropriate strategy for Iran in relation to the belt and road initiative?

7. Evaluating Iran's policy towards the belt and road initiative so far?

8. Views on Iran's strategy towards the belt and road initiative and national interests?

9. Causes and factors of Iran's current position in the belt and road initiative?

10. Suggestions for Iran becoming more active and taking advantage of the opportunities and advantages of the project?

Based on the regular random method, a sample of 50 informants was considered for the survey. For this purpose, according to the field of activity of individuals, 63 people were referred to, 13 of whom refused to participate in the survey, stating that they did not know enough about the nature of the Chinese plan; And 50 people participated in the survey through a written questionnaire and face-to-face interview (qualitative interview). The composition of the respondents in terms of job position and field of activity is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Composition of respondents by field of activity*

Description - Responsive	Number	Description - Responsive	Number
Ambassador	4	Private sector activist in Iran and China	3
Second person and embassy staff	4	Professor and Lecturer in International Relations	3
Advisor (Economic and Commercial)	3	Professor and lecturer of political geography	2
Economic Active (Iran-China)	3	Ph.D. Student in Public Policy	2
Economic activist in South Asia	2	Professor and lecturer of public policy	2
Active in the Chamber of Commerce	2	Informed tourism instructor about China affairs	5
Iran Friendship Associations with Countries	2	Expert on the subject of the new Silk Road	2
Managing Director of the National Newspaper	2	Iranians living abroad in Asia	2
Managing editor of the provincial newspaper	2	Student of Political Sociology	2
Editor of the national newspaper	1	Chinese journalist and reporter	2
Total			50

### Research Findings

Awareness of the respondents on the subject of the project, history, member countries, history of the Silk Road and the Chinese

initiative of the belt and road and Iran's relationship with it; In this question, information was obtained about the awareness or lack of awareness of the respondent. (Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
*Respondents' awareness of China's Belt and Road Initiative*

Row	Answers	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	I have enough information	50	79.6	The respondents were related to the subject in one of the following ways; Work experience and responsibility; Research (writing a book or article); Economic and social activity; Political activities; Media, etc.
2	I do not have enough information	13	20.4	Some people refused to talk due to administrative responsibilities.
Total	Both options	63	100	

Considering the educational and professional position and the administrative position of the respondents, the generalization of the results shows that about 80% have enough information about the new Silk Road and the Chinese initiative of the belt and the

road, and have followed its issues; And about 20 percent have less information than the plan. This point shows the sensitivity of economic and social activists to the importance and effects of the plan for Iran and the region.

**Table 3.**  
*The nature of the belt-road plan according to the respondents*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	security	15	30	
2	Geopolitics	30	60	Focusing on Central Asia, Africa, West Asia and so on.
3	Economic	30	60	According to the apparent emphasis in the design.
4	Social and cultural	5	10	
5	Security and Geopolitics	30	60	
6	Economic and geopolitical	42	84	
7	Security, geopolitics and economics	45	90	
8	All four options	50	100	

Awareness of the elites' view of the nature of the Chinese initiative is important in judging the relationship between Iran and China. More than 60% of respondents consider the nature of the belt and road initiative to be geopolitical and 30% economic. But one hundred percent of the respondents believe that the belt-road is a multidimensional project and has a combined nature with a geopolitical, security, economic and cultural-social approach and a system for an ambitious goal. Despite the economic unveiling of the plan, China's main goal is to gain supremacy and become the world's number one power; The removal of Western hegemony and the change of order in the structure of

world politics to order is based on the Chinese model. This view is consistent with the statement of Chinese officials. Despite previous leaders such as Deng Xiao Peng who insisted on hiding China's intentions, today's Chinese leaders have made this clear. In fact, China's international plans are aimed at gaining control of economic resources as a tool of political supremacy in global governance.

C- China's goals in the Belt and Road Initiative; Apart from the nature of the plan and the hidden intentions of the Chinese authorities, what is the central goal that is stated in official statements and in the statements of stakeholders or is taken from the content of the plan?

**Table 4.**  
*China's pivotal goal in the Belt and Road Initiative*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	Economic	32	64	Responses to economic challenges and problems were included below.
2	Geopolitics	14	28	Such as competing with the United States; Influence in Central Asia in competition with Russia; Supremacy over neighboring powers such as India and Japan, weakening dollar hegemony, a new world order, etc. were considered in this option.
3	security	3	6	Responses to the challenges of separatism and the fight against domestic and regional terrorism were included in this option.
4	Sociocultural	1	2	Only one in 50 responses emphasized the social and



cultural purpose and connection of the nations of the region.			
Total	All four options	50	100

About 64% of respondents - most of them diplomats and private sector economic activists - believe that the economic goal of the project is prominent. Given the slowdown in China's economy since 2016 and forecasts for China's economy in 2049, the viewer sees the Belt and Road Initiative as an effort to stabilize the economy and achieve 10 percent re-growth, or at least maintain the status quo. The details of the answers emphasize this point; China, after rising to the level of the world's second largest economy and growing at a steady rate of 10 percent over the three decades since the reforms began, is now seeking measures to maintain the status quo, gain market share, and access resources and raw materials. Also, cheap, stable and safe energy, labor market for manpower, etc. in environments other than its own territory; Otherwise, in addition to declining global standing, it will face challenges threatening the country's integrity.

According to 28% of respondents, the central goal is the belt-road, the geopolitics of power and the acquisition of Chinese hegemony in the world, and 6% of respondents consider it a security plan. This view is based on the memory of China's humiliation in the first half of the twentieth century, on the one hand, and the presence of great powers in the Strait of Macau and the South China Sea, on the other, the alliance of some neighbors with the United States; Gaining the necessary

capacity to deal with threats in the South China Sea, the Asia-Pacific region, and regional and trans-regional threats is the main goal of China's efforts. This view sees the existence of the Cyber Belt as a sign of China's efforts to control security in the region; In this context, he believes that China seeks to solve the problems of separatism, sectarian-religious disputes and the support of some neighbors to certain groups, domestic terrorism, the return of Taiwan, domination and control of the sea and land borders. This analysis also confirms the strengthening of the navy and the increase in military budgets in China's five-year development plans.

Only 2 percent of respondents see the goal of the Belt and Road Initiative as socio-cultural, and believe that China has begun a soft effort to expand ties with the nations of the region by focusing on Central Asia. This view holds that China seeks to strengthen convergence among the nations of the region by further understanding the culture, script and language, history, values, ideology, moral teachings and principles, and ancient Chinese beliefs. The program reduces land administration costs, security and tackling China's political and ethnic tensions and social challenges by expanding communications, political and social interactions between groups and parties and grassroots organizations, and direct communication between nations.

**Table 5.**

*Iran's position in the Belt and Road Initiative in terms of national interests, win-win conditions, how to interact, measures to benefit from the benefits of the plan, Iran's short-term and long-term strategy for cooperation.*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	It is convenient	8	16	Iran's position in terms of transportation and transit capacities and in comparison, with other member countries of the project. Economic-political-security interests and regional and trans-regional status.
	not suitable	42	84	
2	Supplied	8	16	Output Cooperation-Economic and ... According to the statement of the Chinese plan. The degree of seriousness and attraction to cooperation.
	Not supplied	42	84	
3	There is	2	4	A realistic strategy that guarantees the national interest.
	Does not exist	48	96	
4	Is established	16	32	Iran's position in terms of transportation and transit capacities and in comparison, with other member countries of the project.
	Not established	34	68	
5	It is desirable	8	16	Economic-political-security interests and regional and trans-regional status. Output Cooperation-Economic and ... According to the statement of the Chinese plan.
	It is inefficient and weak	42	84	
6	Achieved	10	20	The degree of seriousness and attraction to cooperation.
	It is not possible	40	80	

According to 84% of respondents, Iran's position in the Belt and Road Initiative is not suitable in comparison with countries in the region, including Pakistan, Central Asian countries, etc., due to its transit, sea and rail capacity and geo-economic and geostrategic position. This view believes that Iran should be the belt-road axis and play a decisive role and take the initiative at sea and on land, considering the north-south and east-west corridors. However, 16% of respondents consider Iran's position appropriate and growing, considering the signing of cooperation agreements and economic relations between the two countries, Iran's membership in the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank and

the Silk Road Fund, as well as its initial agreement with Iran's membership in the Shanghai Organization. Also, 84% believe that Iran's national interests are not served in the plan. There is no win-win relationship and Iran has become a market for Chinese products. 68% believe that there is no interaction between Iran and China. China's priority is to maintain its position and relationship with the United States, and China's treatment of Iran at the time of the JCPOA agreement and the change in behavior after the withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA is seen as evidence of this claim.

According to 84% of the respondents, Iran's strategy in the belt-road is inefficient

and there is a kind of indecision in the behavior of policymakers. Also, 80% of the respondents believe that with the current strategy and due to the fact that the corridors do not pass-through Iran, the belt and road initiative will not be of benefit to us; Unless it enters the plan seriously and with initiative, and with appropriate agreements, plays a

decisive and influential role.

E- Considering the geo-economic, geopolitical and geo-strategic position of Iran and the importance of transportation, trade and transit in the road-belt, what will be the impact of the project on the transportation sector of Iran? What will be the consequences of Iran's cooperation or non-cooperation?

**Table 6.**

*Evaluation of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Iran's transportation and transit*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	It has a positive effect	45	90	Join the Belt and Road Initiative.
2	It has a negative effect	3	6	Due to the lack of transit routes through Iran, the lack of connection of Iranian corridors; Lack of Iranian strategy in the plan.
3	Is a threat	2	4	Strengthen the position of Pakistan and some countries in the region in cooperation with China.
Total	All three options	50	100	

90 percent of respondents consider the impact of Iran's joining the road-belt on the transit boom; Development of transport infrastructure, especially in the railway and free-way sectors; Terminals and ports, especially ports in the southeast; The connection of Iran's corridors to international transit routes, including Traska, the Silk Road's land and sea routes, and the globalization of Iran's economy and the impact on the liberation of a single oil-based economy are positively assessed. Six percent of the respondents, stating that the belt and road initiative routes do not intersect Iran's corridors and strengthen the C-Pack route, consider the plan to have negative effects for Iran. This view believes that the belt-road plan weakens Iran's transit and geo-economic position.

Four percent of respondents, given the volume of Chinese investment in Pakistan, the Kashgar-Gwadar trade route, the centrality of the port of Gwadar, and China's strong presence in the Indian Ocean; And China's widespread influence in Central Asia and Chinese investment in the Persian Gulf; Political and economic strengthening of peripheral countries is seen as a threat and a reduction of Iran's geopolitical weight in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean and an increase in the costs of territorial protection.

F- How is Iran's strategy in the road belt evaluated so far? Why was this strategy adopted? What is Iran's long-term approach: playing an active and effective role or being neutral and passive?

**Table 7.**  
*Iran's strategy in the belt-road so far*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	It is convenient	8	16	Given the circumstances, the current strategy is appropriate. Iran must move closer to the East and China to the West.
2	It is not suitable	32	64	No specific action has been taken and the plan has been left in a state of uncertainty and silence.
3	It is weak and inefficient	10	20	Iran's strategy is not effective and despite its important capacities and capabilities, it has not been able to attract the attention of members.
Total	All 3 options	50	100	

84% of respondents consider terms such as Iran's strategy in the road-belt to be inappropriate and inefficient compared to some countries in West Asia, Central Asia and Africa.

No action has been taken; Iran's behavior was passive; This plan has been forgotten in Iran; Transportation and transit are not a priority for the government; Iran has no plans for the transportation industry; In Iran, the plan has not been understood; There is no consensus on the plan; The multiplicity of references and the lack of unit management have led to a lack of follow-up; They do not trust China; The tendency towards the West and distrust towards the East has caused this plan to be neglected and abandoned; No structure has been established in this regard; International challenges have prevented Iran from participating in regional development projects; Neglect and lack of work led to the design routes being designed outside of Iran; Iran's strategy is not effective and has not

been considered by members, etc.

According to this view, Iran's strategy in the Belt and Road Initiative is among the subjective and passive strategies.

According to 16% of the respondents, Iran's strategy was appropriate and in line with national interests. This view includes membership and investment in the Asian Infrastructure Bank, the Silk Road Fund, attending project-related meetings, announcing support for the project, and Chinese investment in these various sectors. Automotive industry, railways such as Mashhad-Tehran and Tehran-Isfahan high-speed trains, reconstruction of the transport fleet, Tehran-North freeway, etc. show the activity and appropriate strategy of Iran in the belt and road initiative. With this view, Iran's strategy is one of the exploitative strategies.

G- Why did Iran not adopt a clear policy towards this plan until the end of 1397, despite the welcome of the road-belt?

**Table 8.**  
*Factors of inefficiency of Iran's strategy in the belt-road.*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	China ignores Iran's role in the plan	12	24	Iran's lack of priority in the belt and road initiative for China
2	External inhibitors and the role of the third factor	6	12	Western influence on Iran-China interactions
3	Lack of a clear Iranian strategy for the plan	32	64	Lack of consensus of policy makers and decision makers involved
Total	3	50	100	

**Table9.***What is the most appropriate strategy for Iran towards the belt-road?*

Row	Response	Number	Percentage	considerations
1	Leading and creative (active participation in the project)	45	90	Belt-road is an opportunity. Iran should be active and have an initiative
2	Passive (non-participation)	0	0	
3	Exploitative	5	10	This plan has vague goals. Iran should take advantage of the plan.

According to 90% of the respondents, Iran's current strategy in the road-belt is not appropriate and the emphasis on adopting an appropriate strategy is Iran's serious and active participation. Evaluating the views and findings is that the expectation and desire of the elites from Iranian policymakers is to adopt a pioneering and creative strategy and active participation in the belt and road initiative in order to ensure Iran's national interests, initiative and focus.

#### **Analysis of Iran's strategy in the belt and road initiative from the perspective of public opinion**

Most researchers and analysts emphasize the active role of Iran in the road-belt. Here are some examples of perspectives. It is necessary for the country and decision-making institutions to reach a national definition of this plan according to the aspects, and based on this definition, enter into an explicit bilateral dialogue with China and reflect the responsibility and at the same time the share of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this plan (Khadagholipour, 2017; p. 40). Iran must pay attention to public diplomacy. To order foreign investment (both attracting capital and investing), using regional space (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) as a prelude to promoting economic diplomacy at the regional and trans-regional level (Talebi Arani, 2016: p. 34).

Iran should try to compete with China in other things through this road on the one

hand and on the other (Salimi Borujeni, 2017). In order to play a role, Iran must have an operational plan and lead the level of negotiations to the railway connection between the two countries and more real and objective issues (Karami; 2016; 19). According to Zare, the threat in the security environment of the south and southeast of the country, especially in the form of the Kashgar-Islamabad-Gwadar project and corridor, can pose a far more dangerous threat to Iran's national security than the threat of this strategy in the northern security environment. Because in this environment, China will not only have more opportunities and leisure to transform and translate geoeconomics into geopolitical influence and openness; But also, assuming the port of Gwadar as a commercial hub, Iran's comparative economic advantages, especially in the form of the port of Chabahar, can be greatly reduced. Therefore, if such a possibility is realized, not only the geo-economic loneliness of Iran will not be solved, but this loneliness will also increase more (Zare, 2017: IRAS).

Therefore, efforts for China to invest in Chabahar are necessary (Shah Mohammadi, 2017: p. 119). And in order to neutralize the direct and indirect threats of the United States, Iran has to increase its friendship or even rely on the powers that seem to define part of its national interests in different and reciprocal areas with the United States. (Yazdani and Et al, 2016: p. 174).

Vafaei Saadi believes that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the observer members of the Shanghai Organization, whose position will most likely be promoted to a permanent and permanent member in the near future; And the possibility of joining the initiative of the BRICS Plus groups also has the appropriate capacities and capabilities to bring the views of the Rick Triangle closer in order to create a new international order (Vafaei Saadi, 2018: p. 143). But Iran's influence and ability to converge in the region is not enough. Maintaining constructive relations between China and the United States means that if the Chinese seek an agreement with countries like Iran, there will be more conflict between the two countries; Therefore, the continuation of Iran's cooperation with China requires and is subject to solving problems with the United States (Sajjadpour and Shariati, 1390: p. 94). Most experts cite the lack of a unified view and understanding of the belt-and-road initiative between policymakers, Ambiguity about China's goals, lack of a clear strategy for the plan, failure to determine who is responsible for pursuing the plan, the multiplicity of references, parallelism, and a pro-Western approach within the executive system as factors of uncertainty and silence.

Experts emphasize the positive effects of the road belt on the Iranian economy. According to the Sixth Plan, Iran should grow by 8% in 4 years, which requires \$ 300 billion in foreign investment. Asia Infrastructure Bank has a good potential to provide this capital (Kamali Ardakani, July 2019) and if we are to be a leading country, we must attract foreign investment. For Iran, this plan is an opportunity. (Shariati, July 2019). From an economic point of view, this plan will increase the volume of GDP. Naturally, if Iran does not actively participate in this project, it

will be considered a threat to Iran (Gharib, June 2019). Iran's participation in this project is important in the growth and development of trade (Kafami, July 2019).

Given Iran's history on the Silk Road and Iran's exceptional position on the new road, Iran is one of the closest and most cost-effective way to achieve overall goals (Ranjbar, June 11, 2019). And it can be politically and economically useful for Iran. Provide access to East Asia for Iran and facilitate the transfer of gas and energy (Rahimpour, June 2019). The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative has the greatest impact on world economic and trade development. The basis of Iran's development is transit. The connection of Taybad-Qasr Shirin railway is a strategic route. The revival of the Silk Road is the revival of a historical socio-economic advantage for Iran (Saifullah Yazdani, July 2019). And Iran's presence in the Belt and Road Initiative is a necessity. This large economic plan provides mutual benefits and is very important for Iran's economic development (Taherian, June 2019).

However, despite the opinions, Iran's strategy in the road-belt is not appropriate in the opinion of the respondents and no acceptable action has been taken by Iran. Because in the matter of the belt-road plan, the extra-ministerial committee was not formed, did not find a special trustee and the issue was abandoned. In addition, we do not have a single understanding on the issue. (Emami, May 21, 2019). Ambiguity is in the description of the characteristics of the road (Alamai, June 2019) and in policy-making in economic development, we are confused and do not have a national development model. We are challenged inside; our task is not clear and we do not know what we want? The Chinese do not want the challenge. They evaluate their interests (Faghihi, June 2019).

However, we have a strategy regarding the belt and road initiative, we do not have a strategy. We do not have a specific strategy and policy. Recently, emphasis has been placed on relations with China, including the Belt and Road Initiative. Expanding the Pakistan-China relationship in the short term is not in our interest and in the long term, it is a threat (Managhebi, July 2019).

What is the solution to the realization of Iran's national interests and the benefits of the road-belt project? Iran's impact on the plan depends on the plan to implement the plan and the scope of the plan's influence in the geographical area and the degree of participation and exploitation of the plan (Dastgheib, August 2019). This plan is important for the development of transportation and tourism. It is necessary to have a comprehensive strategic and expert plan and a more active strategy must be adopted (Ahmadi, July 2019). Due to delays in policy-making over the project, the Silk Road has changed. Iran is not very profitable if the corridors are not cut. In the new direction, Iran is weak. It has been delayed and we have to do something.

We must have an active strategy (Ghavam Shahidi, May 2019). The priority in the belt and road initiative is Iran's interests. In terms of sustainable development, tourism development and economic development, it is better to try to have an active participation.

Infrastructure should be developed by

preserving the environment and natural resources (Rahimpour, July 2019). Our national interests and the position of our regions require us to be more active in this project (Taherian, June 2019). According to the innovators and in order to achieve the goals of the project, the Chinese are interested in Iran being at the center of this belt and road initiative. Iran must take advantage of the rivalry between the powers.

This is a good opportunity to reconsider our view of the East. With strategy and active participation, Iran must secure its interests from these competitions. The main solution is to change our view of the world and the one-sided hostilities we have (Emami, June 98). In response to some comments that focus on taking the initiative from Iran to participate in the project; Some experts believe that effective participation in the project is essential. But not more than the share that we want to be towards the world and the center of all interactions, and not less than the power and capacity to open the way for the presence of others (Rezaei, July 2019). However, in any case, the most appropriate strategy for Iran is to take an active approach to the discussion of transit, whether we build our own networks or create networks in the networks that are defined in the region (Gharib, June 2019). The proposed solutions in the table below can be effective in meeting the expectations and goals.

**Table 10.**

*Strategies for taking advantage of the opportunities and benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative*

Topic	Suggestions / solutions
Strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The strong and serious emergence of Iran in the Asian equations.</li> <li>- Cooperation with China and exit from the domination and deadlock of the dollar.</li> <li>- Defining projects to participate in the project.</li> <li>- Changing strategy and increasing international interactions to break out of geopolitical isolation.</li> </ul>
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paying attention to the Golden Belt: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and activating this transit route</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increase interaction with the United States and the powers of the triangle (China, India and Russia).</li> <li>- Presenting a model of national development, elite consensus and defining a clear policy in international relations.</li> <li>- Focus on transit, activate the north-south corridor and take the initiative in the region.</li> <li>- Forming a study team focusing on the Center for Strategic Studies and increasing Iran's share in the project</li> <li>- Implement macro-policies related to the project.</li> </ul>
Structural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creating an organizational structure called "Silk Road" (an independent organization with a deputy in road and urban development) and delegating the necessary resources, capital and authority to revive the Silk Road.</li> </ul>
Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preparing infrastructure, reviving historical roads, including: Sard-Pasargad road; Spice Road (Sea Silk Road) as well as Silk Road routes with a transit and tourism development approach.</li> <li>- Defining a new network for Iran's transit and active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.</li> </ul>

### **Changing the strategy and turning Iran's policy to the east**

Iran's policy and strategy towards the Belt and Road Initiative can be divided into three stages as follows:

The first stage - from the beginning of the project in September 2013 to Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in 2016. The most important step in this phase has been the study, review and evaluation of the plan within the framework of sectoral policies. Iran's diplomacy is focused on JCPOA and the reform of relations with the West, and interactions with China have continued at the level of current cooperation.

Step 2 - From Xi Jinping to the end of 2016. The object visits and the official invitation of Iran to cooperate in the project, considering the political atmosphere affected by Barjam, will lead to the signing of 17 memorandums of cooperation and readiness to develop relations. Iran's membership in the Asia Infrastructure Development Bank (investment of 1.67% of the bank's shares) as well as membership and investment in the Silk Road Fund are the consequences of this approach. During this period, an advisory committee will be formed on how Iran will

participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on the General Directorate of Foreign Economic Relations in the Foreign Investment Organization and attracting technical and credit assistance. However, despite the Chinese President's visit to Iran and the signing of cooperation documents, the participation of the Iranian Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance in the 2017 meeting of the member countries of the Belt and Road Initiative and the announcement of Iran's cooperation; In practice, Iran's policy towards the plan did not appear and no significant action was taken.

Third phase (now) - Agreement and preparation of the document of the 25-year comprehensive plan of Iran-China cooperation, formation of a joint commission of Iran-China cooperation with the focus on the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance from late 2016; The activation of the Chinese special table in the relevant executive apparatuses and the pursuit of the issue in the framework of national policy and sectoral policies of the apparatuses is an objective manifestation of the change in Iran's policy in the road-belt. Some experts attribute the current situa-



tion in Iran-West relations to the shift of Iran's policy to the East and strategic cooperation with China. But for some diplomats, the strategy of looking east is a strategic one that has always been emphasized in our foreign policy by high-ranking officials; Although in practice it has not been addressed enough, with the recent withdrawal of the United States from the UN Security Council, the need for this strategy has become even more apparent and requires vigilance and speed in decision-making and a strong presence in decision-making arenas. (Roozbehani, August 2019).

Following the change in Iran's strategy in the belt and road initiative and the rotation of foreign policy to the east and the beginning of Iran-China interactions to develop a comprehensive strategic document of 25 years of cooperation; During a visit to China and a conversation with Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Dr. Zarif tweeted in Chinese; I had a detailed and constructive conversation with my good friend Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister. We have common views on bilateral, regional and global issues. A 25-year roadmap to strengthen a comprehensive strategic partnership and an active role in the Belt and Road Initiative, One Zone, One Road (News Observation, 2019).

Iran participated in the second summit of the member countries of the Belt-Road Project, April 27-29, 2019 in Beijing with a high-level delegation. At this meeting, Iran's readiness to implement infrastructure projects in line with the Belt and Road Initiative worth \$ 50 billion using the capital resources of the Belt and Road Initiative was announced and specified; This plan has always been welcomed by the Islamic Republic and from the perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative will play a very important and

constructive role in the direction of global development and relations between countries.

The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative will lead to greater convergence among the countries along the Silk Road and, as a result, will be a factor in creating and strengthening lasting security and world peace (Dezhpsand, IRNA; 2019). The Iranian Foreign Minister also called the Belt and Road Initiative a revival of the Silk Road and a sign of a bright future, and believes that Iran and China have a win-win view in international relations. Reviving the Silk Road in a modern and up-to-date way can ensure the interests of all countries (Elhami, 2019). According to the information, the document of the 25-year comprehensive plan of strategic cooperation between Iran and China has been approved by the presidents and is in the stage of administrative formalities for final signing. Despite the ambiguities and negative mentality of some analysts about the plan, the road-belt has expanded the Iran-China relationship and formed the framework of economic cooperation.

### **The most important obstacles to advancing Iran's strategy in the belt and road initiative**

Obstacles and challenges in advancing Iran's strategy in the road-belt can be examined in both external and internal parts. In the external section, issues such as the following can be mentioned. Western economic sanctions against Iran and deterrence due to political confrontation with the United States in achieving Iran's economic goals; Political and economic rivalry of countries in the region, including: India and Pakistan, India and China, and Russia with China and India and its impact on Iran's foreign policy and regional relations; As well as the joining of most countries of the world to the Belt and Road

Initiative and Iran's procrastination as a threat to the opportunity to gain a suitable position in the project.

These can be mentioned in the section on internal inhibitors. Political barriers (ideological attitudes, distrust of China, unpleasant experiences of working with superpowers, both for and against the 25-year-old lack of consensus among policymakers); Economic barriers (lack of infrastructure for transport and transit development, lack of resources and capital to implement projects, lack of cooperation between countries and lack of strong investment partners, legal constraints for foreign investment in Iran); Management barriers (building consensus and resolving political challenges, persuading public opinion, and gaining popular support for government strategy); And implementation barriers (planning and forecasting of necessary projects, selection of executing companies and capable contractors, concluding a memorandum of understanding, consortium and agreement with domestic and foreign companies to implement projects). In economic challenges, these can be enumerated. Barriers to attracting capital and foreign investors for large projects in the country, competition from neighboring countries, Central Asia, the European Union and other countries. Economic belt paths 21st Century Belt and Road, Silk Road Initiative and restrictions on Iranian trade (oil sales, goods, currency exchange, etc.).

Some politicians speak of the need for Iran's participation and proximity to China "(Dr. Maliki, 2020); They have expressed doubts about the policy of turning east and in terms of comprehensiveness in adopting this strategy. Naseri, a political activist and former CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency (IRNA), has said that assuming a 25-year ambiguous Iran-China agree-

ment is finalized will not help solve Iran's problems. According to him, the rational reform of foreign policy, the way of national salvation and the survival of the government, is to change the approach of the core of political power to the world and the nation (Naseri, 2019). Thus, despite the significant and acute differences in the views of analysts, researchers, policymakers and experts on the agreement; It seems that the most difficult issue and the main obstacle in advancing the mentioned agreement is attracting public opinion and creating a consensus to legitimize the strategy of 25-year strategic cooperation between Iran and China.

### Conclusion

In this study, using a qualitative interview method (detailed interview) and a limited questionnaire, a collective opinion of political and social elites was taken as a reflection of public opinion on Iran's strategy in the road-belt. Survey findings indicate that 80% of the target population is sufficiently aware of the road belt and the course of action by Iran. One hundred percent of respondents consider the road belt to be a multidimensional project with a geopolitical, economic, security, social and cultural nature. According to 84% of the respondents, Iran's strategy in the road-belt is inappropriate, weak and inefficient.

As a result, according to 90% of respondents, Iran's position in the plan is not suitable compared to countries in the region, including Pakistan, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, etc. 84% of respondents believe that the current strategy does not serve Iran's national interests. 96% believe that there is no win-win relationship between Iran and China, as the Chinese claim in the Belt and Road Initiative. 68% believe that there is no bilateral interaction and 80% believe that the current

procedure does not allow Iran to benefit from the benefits of the plan. 64% of the respondents attribute this situation to the lack of a clear Iranian strategy for the plan and indecision and indecision towards it.

Finally, 90% of respondents believe that Iran's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative and its active presence in it will have a positive impact on transit, infrastructure development and Iran's economy in the transportation sector; And considers the best strategy against the belt and road initiative to be a pioneering and creative strategy; And they believe that considering the background and historical role of Iran in the Silk Road, North-South and East-West corridors, Iran should have an active participation along with initiative, focus and determination in the belt and road initiative. This strategy can strengthen Iran's geopolitical position by consolidating and maintaining its geo-economic and geo-strategic position. According to the results of the poll, public opinion regarding Iran's recent strategy towards the road-belt is in line with and confirms the hypothesis of the article.

According to the theory of the supporting coalition, external turmoil and internal shocks (political crisis, coup, change in socio-economic conditions, inefficiency of policies, etc.) are among the factors of policy change. The supporting coalition is based on three fundamental foundations at the level: macro (government), middle (sub-system actors) and micro (public opinion). These foundations influence dependent variables, beliefs, and policies through policy-based learning. The theory of the advocacy coalition at the micro level is the social psychology of the people-public opinion. Public opinion is a platform for policy learners. Public opinion, by evaluating policies and expressing the will of the people and proposing solutions, focuses politicians' views on the facts

and plays a key role in adopting strategy and policy choices.

Despite announcing its support for the road-belt, Iran had not adopted an appropriate strategy for the plan by the end of 2018. The findings of the poll indicate that public opinion with the following goals calls for a creative strategy and active participation of Iran in the China Road and Belt initiative. Improving regional and international position; Boom in transportation and transit and exit from the base oil economy; Increase the ability to compete with the West, revive the historic Silk Road and strengthen Iran's position on the new Silk Road; Strengthening Iran's regional position in Central Asia; Strengthening Chabahar port and turning it into a maritime trade hub; Liberation from the domination of the dollar; Getting out of political isolation and having a worthy presence in the global equations; Iran's Geopolitics in the Framework of the Future World Order; Balancing relations with East and West, regulating relations with China as a 21st century superpower, responding to the private sector and solving economic problems, and so on.

Public opinion has played an effective role in expressing the social reality and changing the beliefs of the policy makers of the 11th government, learning policy-oriented and forming a coalition on changing the approach in foreign policy towards the East. Policymakers have chosen a strategy to increase engagement with China as part of a 25-year belt and road Initiative cooperation strategy, based on public opinion and policy evaluation. However, despite the announcement of the following three sections, many questions and points of ambiguity have been raised by the elites, which need to be clarified by the government and to create public confidence. There are many questions and ambiguities raised by the elites that need to be

clarified by the government and reassured by the public. 1- Science and technology; 2- Membership in investment institutions; 3- Development of transportation infrastructure, as the main axes of cooperation, due to the lack of accurate information on how to agree and the effects of the plan.

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