Connecting Civilizations through Science: Sinology and the Development of Iran–China Scientific Cooperation within the Framework of the Global South

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Distinguished University Presidents, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here at the Shanghai World Expo Center among scholars and academic leaders from around the world.

Let me begin with a simple thought: throughout history, civilizations have grown stronger not by remaining isolated, but by learning from one another. For centuries, the Silk Road connected Iran and China—not merely as a network of trade routes, but as a bridge for the exchange of scientific knowledge, philosophical ideas, and technological innovation. Today, we have the opportunity to continue that tradition through universities, research, and academic partnerships.

I will organize my remarks around three themes: our historical foundations, present opportunities, and our shared responsibilities within the Global South.

1. Historical Foundations: A Long Tradition of Mutual Learning

The relationship between Iran and China extends far beyond modern diplomacy. For centuries, scholars, physicians, and travelers exchanged knowledge between our civilizations. Astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy moved across boundaries and enriched both societies—a tradition exemplified by the scientific interaction during the Mongol and Ilkhanid periods, including the establishment of the Maragheh Observatory in the thirteenth century.

The lesson is clear: cooperation between Iran and China is not simply the exchange of technologies. It is part of a much longer tradition of mutual learning, which provides a strong foundation for our contemporary academic relations.

2. From Historical Friendship to Modern Scientific Cooperation

Today, both countries possess significant academic capacities and face common challenges that require scientific solutions. The real success of our relationship will depend on how effectively we translate political commitments into practical academic projects.

We must focus on several priority areas. First, emerging technologies—including artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and renewable energy. Second, environmental sustainability and water management. Iran and China both face water scarcity and climate change. The University of Tehran has already established formal partnerships with institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Yunnan University to address these ecological challenges. Finally, we must collaborate on agriculture, public health, and advanced engineering.

These priorities require joint research projects, shared laboratories, and regular exchanges of staff and students. The objective is to move beyond declarations and establish partnerships that produce measurable achievements.

3. The Importance of Sinology, Language, and Iranian Studies

Scientific cooperation cannot develop fully without mutual understanding of our history, culture, and intellectual traditions. Sinology helps Iranian researchers understand China more deeply, just as Iranian Studies introduces the richness of Persian civilization to Chinese universities.

In this regard, I am proud to highlight the Confucius Institute at the University of Tehran, which serves as a vital hub for Chinese language education. We must continue to strengthen this institution, alongside dedicated academic chairs in Sinology and Iranian Studies. Language is the key that unlocks mutual trust.

To give this commitment a permanent home, I am pleased to propose that the University of Tehran host the first branch of this Sinology Center in Iran. With our existing capacities, faculty, and historical ties, UT can be uniquely positioned to serve as the regional hub for Sinology. We are ready to provide the location and academic infrastructure; with your support, we can ensure this branch becomes a lasting success.

4. Building Scientific Bridges Across the Global South

Beyond bilateral cooperation, Iran and China have an opportunity to contribute to a wider process of scientific collaboration among countries of the Global South.

These countries share many challenges: technological inequality, environmental pressures, and limited access to scientific resources. Universities in these countries should not be regarded merely as recipients of knowledge developed elsewhere. They must be recognized as active partners in producing scientific knowledge.

Rather than simply transferring technology, we should promote mutual learning, joint research, and the development of local scientific capabilities.

I am particularly proud to note that the University of Tehran has recently been designated as the National Secretariat and Focal Point for BRICS Scientific and Academic Cooperation in Iran. This role reflects our commitment to this broader vision and provides a natural platform for extending our partnership with Chinese universities to the wider Global South.

5. Practical Priorities for the Future

Distinguished Colleagues, if we want to transform these ideas into concrete achievements, I suggest five practical priorities.

First, stronger institutional partnerships. Cooperation must move beyond individual contacts. I am proud that the University of Tehran already has more than 20 active memoranda of understanding with leading Chinese universities, including Peking, Fudan, and Nanjing University. Our task now is to ensure these agreements translate into funded programs.

Second, joint research and innovation. We should concentrate our resources on a limited number of priority areas, supported by joint laboratories and interdisciplinary research centers.

Third, academic mobility. The exchange of professors, students, and researchers should become central to our cooperation. I particularly encourage jointly supervised doctoral programs and postdoctoral fellowships.

Fourth, stronger links between universities and industry. Scientific research becomes more valuable when its results contribute to society and the economy. We should encourage the participation of technology companies in university cooperation.

Fifth, establishing a wider academic network for the Global South. I strongly encourage a network involving Iranian, Chinese, and other universities from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The University of Tehran's role as the BRICS focal point can serve as an institutional anchor for this network.

Conclusion: A Shared Future Through Science

Let me conclude by returning to the central image of my presentation: the Silk Road. In the past, it connected our civilizations through trade and ideas. Today, universities have the opportunity to continue this tradition on a much larger scale.

As university leaders, we have a responsibility not only to educate students and produce knowledge, but also to build trust and create opportunities for peaceful international cooperation.

The most valuable outcome of our cooperation will not simply be the number of agreements signed. It will be the number of joint research projects completed, young researchers trained, and lasting academic partnerships established.

Let us therefore transform the historical Silk Road into a modern road of science, innovation, and shared progress.

Thank you very much for your attention.