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Pakistan gas deal: Iran backs China's inclusion

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Iran has jumped decisively on the “belt and road” bandwagon, flagging its interest in linking China with its proposed natural gas pipeline to Pakistan.

“I don't think it's too far away for this pipeline to be extended to China through Pakistan. This is something that would be of common interest to Iran, China and Pakistan,” Iran's Ambassador to China Ali Asghar Khaji told *South China Morning Post*.

Iran's Press TV is reporting that China has signed an initial agreement to construct the pipeline from Gwadar to Nawabshah in the southwest of Pakistan, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan, which concluded earlier this week. Gwadar is also the starting point of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which was formally inaugurated during the presidential visit. The CPEC will terminate in China's Xinjiang province, which is already an energy hub from where imported gas from Central Asia is channeled to China's industrial heartland along the coast.

Analysts say that extension of the Iran-Pakistan pipeline to China will be a blow to India, which had pioneered with Iran, the concept of an Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) peace pipeline in 1995. The Iranians have blamed India of dropping out of the project under pressure from the United States in 2009.

The Wall Street Journal had earlier reported the China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau, a subsidiary of Chinese energy giant China National Petroleum Corporation, will build the 700km pipeline to Nawabshah, which is Pakistan's gas-distribution center in the Sindh province.

Pakistan would build the 80km of the pipeline from Gwadar to the Iranian border, where it would link with the already existing 900km pipeline link to the gas fields of South Pars.

On Thursday, the Iran-China relationship seemed gather greater political substance. During a meeting in Jakarta, on the sidelines commemorating 60-years of the Bandung conference, President Xi told his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani of Beijing's intent to forge a "long term and stable energy cooperation" with Iran.