

Jonathan Welcome to the CHINA-MENA podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. For many people watching China in the Middle East, its relationship with Iran has been both troubling and puzzling, troubling because Beijing's support for Iran offers a lifeline to a government that many in the region and in the U.S. see as a major threat to their interests. China and Iran signed a long delayed comprehensive strategic partnership in March 2021, signaling closer political and economic cooperation. And during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in September 2021, Xi Jinping announced that the SCO would start the procedures that would bring Iran in as a full member, something Tehran has coveted since 2008. At the same time, the bilateral relationship has been puzzling because of Beijing's much deeper levels of economic and political engagement with Iran's Gulf rivals, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both of those countries also have comprehensive strategic partnerships with China. The difference being that while Iran's took five years to sign and a year later is still at the implementation stage, the other two were immediately operationalized and have resulted in very deep levels of increased engagement. How was China able to navigate this complex regional terrain while maintaining strong relationships with both sides? And just how committed are Beijing and Tehran to each other? To shed light on this, I am delighted to introduce our first guest to the podcast, Professor Anoush Ansari. Anoush is a professor of international relations at Durham University in the UK, where he's also director of the Sheik Nasser Al Mohammed Al-Sabah program in international relations, regional politics and security. In addition to being an internationally renowned scholar on Middle East politics and who has published deeply and widely on CHINA-MENA relations, including how China's rise is changing in the Middle East, which he co authored with New Fresh in 2020. He's also written a lot on China Iran relations, making him the perfect guest to explain a deeply politicized and often misunderstood bilateral relationship anew. Welcome to the show. Thanks for joining us.

Anoush It's a pleasure. Thank you, Jonathan, for inviting me and thank you for such wonderful billing. I shall look this guy up now, given the billing you've given him.

Jonathan You don't have to look him up, everybody. You're like one of the only academics who goes by first name everywhere. You say enough. It's like spring LeBron to a basketball fan. Everybody knows who Anoush is. You're talking about me. One thing that I thought of, so I'm going to just ask you about your book that you co-authored with New for us: how China's rise to change in the Middle East. One of the chapters that I thought was really, really, really useful for me. You know, as somebody who wants to learn more about this stuff is the chapter you wrote on China in Iran. And one thing that I found incredibly useful was where you map out these different Iranian perceptions of China, you know where you offer a more complex analysis of what's going on in Iran as far as how people describe China, how they think about China. Can you give us just a brief overview of some of the attitudes that you write about in the different factions within Iran and how they think about China.

Anoush Gladly Jonathan. So again, we've got to put this in somewhat of a kind of a broader context. And the context is that Iran, even after the war, which ended in 1988 and in 89, beginning to kind of renew its relations with its neighbors in particular, but also more generally it is very quickly whacked by more sanctions under the Clinton administration, where Iran is again from 93 onwards. And who doesn't remember dual containment, which

put Iran and Iraq in the same kind of a noose as far as the key demonstration was concerned. And it was then that President Rafsanjani in particular, but also Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader, had already in the 1980s established a rapport with the Chinese leadership. Khamenei had been to China. Rafsanjani had been to China in the 1980s. So I began to understand China. And as the pressures of sanctions grew and as Iran felt that despite moving on from the war and its revolutionary rhetoric, it was still under a containment regime. It became much more imperative for them to find new partners, and China then was very interested in developing these partnerships, particularly around Iran's interests in nuclear energy. Right? Remember, China was there on the ground in 1990 to help Iran, and it was under pressure from the West that in the end withdrew. And it was then that would begin to sense and nuanced discussions and conversations in Tehran and its corridors of power and among a multitude of factions about where do we go from here? The distrust of Russia was embedded in Iranian psyche. And it goes back to..

Jonathan It goes back forever right?

Anoush Eighteen hundreds. Nineteen hundreds. The Cold War and so on. So there is as much skepticism about Russia talks of the union as there is about Britain in Iran. So they knew that they couldn't turn to Russia as a trusted partner. They wanted to develop links with Europe. European community as it was then, but Europe was unwilling or unable to do this. This is this lot. Its relations with the United States, even though the Europeans resisted Ilsa, the Iran Libya Sanctions Act of that time that President Clinton had brought into force there couldn't overcome this. And it was then that Iranians had this much deeper debate about, well, who is left? Japan is not going to come to our aid. South Korea is not going to invade Africa and Latin America is far too far away. India is too weak to assist us. It's China, guys. And then it is the debates that go on inside about. But we know nothing about China. How do we know that we can deal with China? China is itself a developing country. And also, it is a secular country that is very skeptical about Muslims. Here we are championing the, you know, global Islam. How are we to compromise around these core issues?

Jonathan And so this isn't a matter of Great Silk Road, you know, historical civilizational ties. This is basically opportunism. This is what's left and right.

Anoush Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You know, you're beginning to look around and you find that you're actually you don't have very many options, but. Right. But the key is China was by then able to supply goods and services in ways that it wasn't able to do in the 1980s because it didn't have the expertise, the resources, the foundations for becoming that kind of economy that it has become. Right. So in many ways. Iran's needs at that time were beginning to be mirrored in China's growing capacity and capabilities. And again, it's our historical crossroads that the two countries have encountered, that China by then is able to say, Well, you know what, we can actually build you an underground system in your capital city. You know why? Because we have learned it from others and we started doing it in our own country. So China builds Tehran's underground metro that Rafsanjani son had taken charge of as a major major. If you like stamps of China's arrival in this area and in Iran in particular. And that was fortuitous, of course, because we Iranians for Tehran, which has been strangled by traffic and by fumes and by congestion to have China, a country that the new and nothing about, turn up and start digging onto the streets and putting in place. What is now a very efficient on the ground system was a masterstroke for both Tehran and for Beijing. And on that, you can then see a whole castle that has now been built.

Jonathan So that's interesting, because you see a similar pattern emerging in a lot of places where China comes in and helps with infrastructure and where a lot of people's impressions of China, you know, went back to a period when it was seen as a producer of cheap consumer goods or not very high quality, but but cheap and fast. And then it starts to deliver the opposite, you know, important infrastructure and important products that a lot of countries need. So people start to see it in a different light. But I think in Iran, like going back to your book, what you can see is it suddenly quickly becomes more complicated than that. It's not just a matter of China's bringing stuff we need through these dialogues. You know, these competing factions within Iran, because of course, we all know that Iran, like China, is not very monolithic in their narratives. They have a lot of different feelings or thoughts or opinions about these things. And when Iranians talk about China, I keep hearing like the whole gamut of, you know, there's the pro and then there's the very anti and there doesn't seem to be a lot in between. So, you know, within these different factions, I think what you write about is, you know, Iranian political leaders that are more of the reform persuasion or the more conservative side. Both seem to look at China quite differently, and that probably has an impact or an influence on how the country relates to China politically, how they engage on different diplomatic issues or issues of development, or Colvin or whatever. So what kind of things do you see there?

Anoush Well, absolutely. I think it just permeates right down to the street level in society, actually. And when I do, I'll answer you in a minute. But in terms of anecdote, when the 25 year agreement that you alluded to at the beginning of our conversation was announced and signed in the mirror room of the parties of the palace in Tehran. And one of the cartoons was. A hand coming out of mainland China with chopsticks, right? Reaching over the map of Iran and picking it up and taking it back. And that was a very popular image at the time when the agreement was signed.

Jonathan There's concern that China is kind of gobbling up and...

Anoush It's not eating the country away. And that, in many ways, is the essence of the different opinions among the elite. Also, you know, the Tehran street, let's call it for want of a better term, because that is an the because it's important because going back to the postwar period, post-1945 Iran had begun to develop a national bourgeoisie, an industry of its own. When the Shah left and the bourgeoisie, the dependable as I called him, who left with him left behind huge amounts of. Capacity, right, industry. And based on Western investments, but also being in many ways like China was at the time. Right. And so there are vested interests even after the revolution in maintaining that degree of national industrial capacity. Right? An independent base and the bourgeoisie is not tied into the elites with the Islamic Republic. But nevertheless, there are those who have direct interests, for example, in Iran's court industry, in Iran's textile industry. And Iran's saying no fracturing industry in Iran's extractive industries who are now partly owned by the state. But there are also private sector state stakeholders in all of these. So one level of fear is that China will come in and as it's done elsewhere, people use the example of Pakistan as just white. Everybody else is out of its way because these products are cheaper if they're more accessible and are better marketed and the Chinese state is behind it. Right? Mm hmm. Then the other element of this is among the factions who are suspicious, if you like, or a bit a bit eclectic about their views and are agnostic about China as well. If we are so completely tied to China, we will lose what is the signature of Iran's foreign policy, which is equal distance between all global powers, which is what Premier Mossad of the 1950s championed, right? That right, we went against the Shah because we accused him of

being in the pocket of Americans. How can we now tell us, if so closely to the winds of China, that our sales are going to be taken up by what China does and not we ourselves?

Jonathan It's interesting when you talked about these companies worrying about China coming into the markets because here in the UAE, you know, I'll often talk to Iranians about what are your perceptions of China? And that's almost always one of the things that comes up. They're flooding us with cheap stuff that doesn't work, and we're so mad at China for giving us, you know, these not very good quality consumer goods. And there seems to be actually at the popular level, quite a bit of resentment. But then among the elites, I think there's different impressions too, because some people want a deeper engagement and other people are apprehensive, kind of in the way you're describing, right?

Anoush And so the concern is the dependencies that China relations with China can create and embed them into the political economy of a country like Iran. And and and but also Iran is in desperate need of investment in its manufacturing industrial base. And the Chinese have tried. They've tried it half heartedly. And Iranians know full well, and this was what President Rouhani was trying to get at is once we signed a nuclear deal, we can get the Europeans back in and eventually the Americans will follow. Right? Why? Because they trust European know-how, because they trust European companies and because they trust that Western countries are not opaque in the relationships, that the contracts are open to due process and they don't have as many secret clauses as the ones that they have with China, for example, and that European companies compete with each other. So if they don't get what they want out of Germany, they know they can go to Italy. And if the Italians don't give it to them, they can go to France and Britain, the Netherlands and so on. You know, let 100 flowers bloom to use the Chinese phrase. With China, it is monolithic. Even the private companies in China, as you know, have to report back to Big Brother. Right. So that element of competition is reduced, which reduces choice in Iran, which affects price, affects efficiency, affects quality, affects the long term partnerships that Iranians do not want to be tied into. That China would like to see very keen on these long supply lines maintaining these relationships. And so that debate is also very alive in terms of looks, if we don't mention it with distance and put all our eggs or most of them into a Chinese basket, then we would be vulnerable to China's pressures. First, because the Chinese know our back is now empty, right? Also, we are vulnerable to what the Chinese flag us because we've got nowhere else to go for measuring the quality, the price, the efficiency and an aftercare of what we do with China. You alluded to the Conservatives, so I'll just come in on that one for a minute. For them, though, for not all, not all of them, but for the factions who are now dominant around President Raisi and Khamenei, the leader. All of these things are immaterial. These are things that should not be of concern because there look at China and increasingly Russia at this strategic level so that the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement, Iran's membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are seen by them as as landmark activities that provide definition for Iran's engagement with China, but also multilaterally with wider Asia or wider Eurasia. So for them, this makes sense strategically because it means that they can turn away from the West and the United States once and for all, and not have to kowtow to America and worry about sanctions. If this is now the safety valve that can remove the sanctions, which it would not, by the way, from their first boss. Secondly, they have vested interests in dealing with. China and Russia, because I alluded to this earlier, because many of the companies which are now looking for profit in imposing sanctions or even within a sanctioned Iran are those who are deeply affiliated with the state. If you're looking for the deep state, look at the Revolutionary Guard, they are tied into networks that are highly profitable and working

with China in a nontransparent way away from the prying eyes of the West is, you know. Heaven, so they see this as not as a problem, but as a strategic opportunity.

Jonathan But at the same time, I mean, you also just a few minutes ago, you referred to this asymmetry, right? Like it does present an opportunity, but at the same time, it does create that tremendous dependency because Iran has very few other options. And China has a lot. And I think that gives China quite a lot of leverage when they're dealing with Iranian leaders. Does that happen? Well, I want to bring that actually to a couple of things you just mentioned. You mentioned the strategic partnership agreement, the comprehensive strategic partnership. You mentioned the SCO. I think both these things are pretty interesting because both of them present Iran with quite a few opportunities. If you know, there's always that conditionality, you know, like the tremendous investment that China has to offer in the strategic or comprehensive strategic partnership isn't really available if Iran is going to be under sanctions forever, because China has shown time and again that their relationship with the U.S. is worth more than them than the relationship with Iran. So the same thing with the SCO joining that cooperation and opening up to Russia and India and Pakistan and all of the Central Asian republics could help Iran tremendously economically. But again, if those countries aren't willing to, you know, work against U.S. sanctions. So it seems to me that that leverage comes into play. Do you think that Beijing is using these opportunities for partnership and so as they're dangling in front of Tehran and saying, look, here's what you get. If you say go back to the JCPOA with the U.S. and negotiate and change your behavior in a way that's more aligned with something that will support regional stability. Not necessarily, you know, cooperate overtly with the U.S., but stop threatening our interests in a very important strategic region. Do you think they're using these opportunities as leverage with Tehran?

Anoush Well, in fact, actually one of the arguments that their reform comes so-called makes is that if we've got deals with other countries, we can get a better deal out of China that, you know, we can still do business with China. But let's do it on better terms. If the Chinese know there is competition from Europe like there was in 2016- 2017, then they're likely to give us better opportunities, better deals in dealing with them once they know we are isolated. Well, you know, they can do whatever they want. And the Chinese are a bit on Shanghai Cooperation Organization Jonathan. I think that is something that the Chinese knew Iran wanted as validation of its trust in China rather than China dangling this in front of them as incentive. It was more Iran wanting to see evidence of China's commitment. And for China, in a sense, it doesn't come at a heavy price for Iran becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Given that, you know, with Russia, is it already a very close relationship? And given that? Iran- Indian relations are not such that would challenge China right within the SCO, so in many ways this was a low hanging fruit for them. But for Iran, an elite is validation that, you know, we've got China as a strategic partner because here they are sponsoring our membership of this, what they see as the Future of Asia organization. And so. It's much more a kind of a mutual nod. And in each other's direction of understanding. Right. But You know, again, people worry about China being in West Asia, in the Gulf and the Middle East and so on, without mentioning that China's interest is profoundly the same as the West, that this region is to be stable. Right. But actually, that is no profit for China, at least instability. Some say rather cynically that instability makes American arms manufacturers very rich. Right? For China, that's not the game that it can compete with the Western yet in this part of the world, you know. And so stability of this region is much more important to a mercantilist China than instability of the region. And it is in that regard that Iran's behavior becomes profoundly important to China. It's not just about the Americans that look, the Americans will always be more

important to us than a regional upstart like Iran, but it's also about China's growing links with the rest of the region. You've mentioned the Emirates, you've mentioned Saudi Arabia. You know, the Chinese are building Kuwait's Silk City. They are heavily invested in Dome in Oman on my offshore Indian Ocean. And they are building a new Cairo of the 6000 years of Egyptian civilization. They are off the coast of the Mediterranean in Israel, helping Israel develop its facilities. They are interested in energy links between Israel, Cyprus and Greece. They are talking to Turkey about Turkey, joining the BRI and so on. You know, Iranian disruption can throw all of this applecart in the air, and that really worries China, and JCPOA is not sufficient. But at least the start of trying to stabilize what is a very unstable relationship. You know, people in Beijing would not have been happy to see ballistic missiles targeted at Abu Dhabi and found at Abu Dhabi during the visit of the Israeli president, when the Chinese themselves are so involved in helping the Emirates become this important hub. Well, if you've got missiles coming down on you, what kind of trouble are you for goodness sake, right?

Jonathan Well not just that but they have between two and three hundred thousand Chinese citizens living in Dubai. So that's a consideration too, right?

Anoush Absolutely.

Jonathan Yeah. I think what you're describing to me is the essence of a lot of when people worry about China's presence in the Middle East as a disruptive actor. I mean, China's interests in the Middle East and especially in the Gulf, are so closely aligned with America's interests in this region and instability and energy getting to global markets. All of this stuff links up very nicely. So you're right. I think with the China Iran relationship, this actually provides an opportunity for a lot of Iran's rivals to try to change its behavior in a more positive way. Not too many other great powers can do that with Iran because they don't have that kind of leverage or positive relations, right?

Anoush Absolutely. You do have to put it impolitely. They have no influence with Tehran at all.

Jonathan Only negative, only a threat to stick.

Anoush Absolutely. You know, there's no carrots that stick all the time, whereas China has carrots as well. But of course, you know, for China to really profit from this, we are right in West Asia. It needs a stable Iran. It needs stable Iran that can smooth the path out of Afghanistan, right across Iran, through Turkey and into Europe. Right. You know, we've got the southern and the northern links and so on. I mean, look at Kazakhstan right now. Right? That would have worried the Chinese an enormous amount. Not that they care too much about the regime change there, but about the stability of Kazakhstan. And it's interesting that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was not called upon to stabilize Kazakhstan, but it was the agreement with Russia that did it from the Chinese side. That makes perfect sense because the Chinese like business and not war. They do not want to interfere in the country's internal affairs in that way. And if, if, if Iran goes belly up, that will be a huge discount, if you like China. That will really damage China's role given what is invested in diplomacy, but also what is promised Iran in terms of this 25 year agreement in terms of memberships and taking over your organization in terms of the VRA and so on. So, you know, the Chinese will have been telling them the importance of stability, the importance of getting your house in order, the importance of OK, you can you can. You can shout slogans at Americans, but don't fire missiles on them, you know?

Jonathan So this actually is I think this is a really important point that doesn't really get picked up on a lot because this 25 year agreement that it is really, you know. Massive headline generator. But we know that China and Iran initially agreed to this comprehensive strategic partnership when Xi Jinping went to Tehran in January 2016. That's right now. He had previously been to Riyadh and signed a similar agreement with the Saudis. And I don't think the timing is a coincidence. He was the first head of state, I believe, to visit Tehran after the JCPOA in my opinion. And this is speculative, but I think it holds up. This seems like China's saying to Iran, Look, you signed the JCPOA. This is kind of a reward, right? We're showing you the path to a more normal status in the region. If you can maintain this, this deal, if you can stick to the obligations within the JCPOA, then you're going to get all this investment, you're going to get all this trade, you're going to see the relationship with China support your interests and development in a lot of ways. But a few months after that, the change of administration in the U.S. signaled that the U.S. was going to take a harder line towards Iran and towards China. And you immediately so China backed away, you know, so the promise of this partnership just completely stalled until what was the summer of 2010, when, you know, it looked like China was trying to create a little more influence in the Gulf in terms of its relations with the US? And it starts to ratchet up again. So it does seem like China's use these these kinds of incentives in the past to get Iran to change its behavior or maybe to be a more stable regional actor. And I think that's kind of what we're seeing at play right now.

Anoush And also sometimes to use Iran to pressure the United States and and in some ways, Iranians are in many ways. Willing partners in that because they go out of their way to pressure the United States and for them to feel part of the elite to feel that it's actually playing an instrumental role in Chinese American relations. I say one thing because it makes them feel relevant to China. Forget the American side to China that you know, here they are the only country which is able to stand up to American pressure in this part of the world while the Americans are applying it in China's part of the world. So if the Americans want to sail through the Straits of Taiwan, for example, well, we can. We can put a few minds out by the Strait of Hormuz for the American fleet coming out. And if the Americans put pressure on China in the South China Sea, for example. But we can sell our fleet round to Yemen as a show of force, and there is a good level of symbolism, Jonathan. But there is also the other side of it is Iran's relationship in this equation seems to be confrontational, whereas Emirates and Saudi Arabia and Israel and Egypt's and Turkey's relationship needs to be compromised. Right. And this is the difference in China's relations with this part of the world. This is the only one which is couched in a hostile triangular relationship. Mm-Hmm. Whereas China, with all other countries and even states, is not hostile, that is concern about Hawaii, about 5G, about infrastructure in Israel and UAE and maybe arms to Saudi Arabia. So there's a whole gamut of issues that Americans have conversations with our Arab allies and Israel. But in Iran, that's not the case. This is a tripod built on tension rather than cooperation between China and the US based on Iran. And that kind of a tripod cannot be as stable as one, which is mutually advantageous as the one between the Arab states and Israel, the United States and China. So long as China and the United States do not see themselves as competing for these countries' patronage, which is not the metric, the Chinese are not telling the Saudis or the Emiratis to stop buying weapons from the states tomorrow. Thank you very much. Bahrain kicked out the Fifth Fleet from Manama tomorrow. Thank you very much because we are here. None of that. None of that with Iran is not the same. And so that makes Iran very much an outlier in China's relations, growing relations and links with this part of the world. And if I was in Tehran, I would see that as a warning rather than something that I would like to cultivate

and develop and deepen even more where you build in security. In China's calculations rather than instability and security.

Jonathan So that's a point you mentioned earlier about Tehran or Iran in the BRI. And that's a point of keeping up with people because I think China Iran's perceived importance in bureau is quite often exaggerated. You know, people say it provides us with a link to the Gulf. But what we've seen from China's BURA approach is that maritime routes are vastly more important. And to get from China to Iran or to get from China to the Gulf via Tehran, you've got to pass through unstable places like Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan now also countries that aren't really heavily populated. You don't have big urban centers full of people and markets, you know, and it goes, it's slower. You know, you're trapped. You can't ship as much by rail. You can't ship as much by highway. We saw when Suez was blocked, you know, whatever last year. Maritime shipping is so important to the global economy, and it's so important to be free. So what Iran offers China in the BRI is actually quite limited compared to these port cities on the Arabian Peninsula. So what are you describing here of this kind of vulnerability that Iran must feel? I think that's only amplified when you realize that China's ambitions are all about connectivity. You know, we saw that when Qatar was isolated, a lot of China's projects there got stalled and a lot of their projects in the UAE and Saudi really ramped up. I think the reason for that and again, speculation, but I think it's because suddenly Qatar didn't connect to as many different places as it used to, whereas the UAE, with its logistics hub in Saudi with its, you know, you know, its Gulf shoreline and its Red Sea shoreline, you know, these places were hyper connected politically, logistically, economically in the same thing with Iran. I mean, it's a huge market. It's huge. You know? Population, but it's also an isolated one. And for what China wants to achieve in the Middle East, you can't really benefit unless you're connected. You need to have these good relations with your neighbors. You need to be economically integrated in the region. So I think this does offer another reason for Iran to if they want to enjoy the benefits of a China relationship, they really have to become more of a, you know, like air quotes, normal country within its own region.

Anoush And also with all of that goes trust that, you know, if there isn't trust among the neighbors between Iran and its neighbors, it is very difficult to then create the conditions that China wants in terms of interactions. So the Chinese don't worry about suddenly Egypt and Israel becoming a committed relationship, they can deal. Around the Suez area, they can deal with Egypt, they can deal with Israel and not worry about the dynamics of relationship between those two countries and so on. They don't have that degree of confidence when dealing with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular. There may be less worry when it comes to Oman and battering Kuwait for obvious reasons. But those are the countries that the Chinese have put a lot of effort into relative to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, where there is this real tension between Iran and those two countries, right? So that lack of trust that actually their Arab partners don't trust Iran. Devalues the primary narrative with them about his interest in developing relations with them because, you know, and I know that those guys in the elites of those countries have always got an eye on Iran, no matter what, no matter what, and and it won't be easy for them to accept China's assurances at face value when they look at what Iran does on the ground, right? And that is a really difficult circle to square for China's. China's diplomats? Very much so. But on the PR right, though, Iran is only part of this jigsaw. Both the European Union, well, let's say Germany in particular and China are very keen to find land routes between the continents. They are very keen to reduce the costs of doing trade for Germany, which is looking at Europe's saturated markets. Asia is vital, but unfortunately, as we see every day in our relations with Russia, which sits on top of Germany's maritime links, is becoming

increasingly dangerous. Right? So Germany would like to have an overland route safe and cheap and reliable, and they don't want it. Yeah, they don't want it to anybody else but China, because they know the Chinese will deliver the infrastructure there. And in that puzzle, Iran is important because it straddles the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. And so, OK, you bypass the southern waterway. But the Caspian is so important for energy routes, but also in the way that now the Caspian states, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are looking at each other. Yeah. You know, today, right now, 2nd of February 2022, it should be Iran that should be coming to the rescue of European countries to supply them gas. Iran is the second largest gas state in the world, right? Far bigger than what Qatar can do. That has got the energy capacity. So off the coast of Wales, we've got a LNG facility owned by a partner that brings LNG for British households and British industry and so on. And we sit here worrying about what if Russia does something to Ukraine, right? President Biden invites Sheik Tamim to go to Washington. To ask him to supply Europe with Qatar's natural gas. Right? Nobody is knocking on Tehran's door and saying, Hey buddy, we know you're sitting on this gas that you don't know what to do with. Because, right, because actually, you can buy it. They need somebody to show them how to turn it into LNG. Put it on these ships and get it out or access to pipelines which are already emerging, Jonathan, that Iran's gas could go through Turkey and into Europe. Somebody tell us you were asking, why are we not at the heart? Of this geopolitical crisis as the savior of the world economy as it were.

Jonathan We can see the reason why, right, because of their politics.

Anoush But you say in that regard, if there was even a symbolic buyer, I. That allowed the building of infrastructure, brought in the resources and so on that Iran's natural gas could be exploited fully and properly. Right. Even if it went to Asia, it would free up somebody else to come to Europe. You know, we are now receiving, you know, gas from the United States in Europe. Competing with Qatar at one level to supply Europe with American fracking gas and the US became the largest producer of this just before the pandemic. Obviously, they are pushing domestic supplies to the United States to get this stuff out and shipping it out to Europe because it is a genuine strategic consideration, you know, right? And here is this huge gas state in total vacuum when all this is going on.

Jonathan Yeah, so I mean, I think what you're describing is pretty consistent with the larger picture of, you know, the BRI and China's inability or reluctance to really engage as deeply with Iran as you would expect. I mean, what I've seen from years of looking at China Gulf relations from this side of the Gulf is really consistent with stories about the importance of Iran. I mean, it consistently does a lot more business with the side. It's got a lot more ex-patriots living on this side. They're doing more, contracting more investment, you know, and because these countries fit into a larger pattern of cooperation and integration with the global economy. So it seems to me, I mean, if China's engagement favors the status quo states, which are largely U.S. allies or partners, everything you've described to me over the past hour or so has been that Iran, China relations are vastly more complex and far less synchronous, as we often seem to hear them in the media that there's a lot of moving parts in there, not always in alignment. A lot of our listeners are going to be, I assume, the policy community of the U.S. given our Atlantic Council production here. If you were just to wrap up here with the message to them, I mean, should they be as concerned about the China Iran relationship as it's often portrayed in the media? Or do you think that this is not as not as concerning a bilateral relationship as it often is?

Anoush I would make it one removed, and I would say they should be concerned about Iran's orientation and showing that that that, you know, enjoys strategic terms. It is really important if we assume that this is the Asian century, if we assume that there are now. Asian regional systems emerging and integrating and so on, and that the danger that this could become insular and inward looking rather than global looking, that if we are pushing China and China more and more towards an integrated position, that having a country sitting in on the western boundaries of Asia hostile to the West is not a good thing because it creates its own dangerous dynamics that that will not benefit the West's and the world's broader interests in that regard. So I would say don't worry so much about it. Iranian Chinese relations, it itself worries about Iran's orientation eastwards and what that means for your interests in West Asia, in Europe, in the Caucasus, in in, in Central Asia and in South Asia. And Iran has a pull in all of these sub theaters and you don't want to reinforce the west and east edges of Asia as a hostile boundary against your interests. So that would be the message I would send. But also, I mean, you know, we've talked about China's relations with the GCC countries. One of the key reasons why that has been so prosperous, of course, is because these countries have access to finance and they have finance. They invest in China as a measure of this, this integrated relationship that they have, they build. They invest in infrastructure, in refineries, in processing plants, in banks and all sorts. Iran doesn't offer them that at all, at all, at all, at all. So at one level, you may worry about the growing financial links between China and your Arab allies. And less so about any monetization of Chinese Iranian relations because Iran is skint. So there are two different levels of concern, Jonathan. If our colleagues, our friends out in the Atlantic Council are going to be listening.

Jonathan You know, that's a really great point to end on. And thanks so much for this. This is really enlightening. I think it's helpful. It gave us a lot more to think about when we think about these two countries. For our listeners, I'm going to put links on the show page four for some of Prof. Anushka's many, many, many, many books on the topic. It's a whole bookcase full of things, but I know that you have a new book about Iran that I think our listeners would find interesting. Before we sign out, I'll give you a chance to plug it. What's the book? Where can they find it?

Anoush Oh, thank you, Jonathan very much. It's called defending Iran from Revolutionary Guards, The Ballistic Missiles with Cambridge University Press. They have co authored with my dear friend and colleague at National Defense University in Washington. Professor got it back. It just came out and you can get it as a PDF as well, if you like. And we think it's a good read. It took us two and a half years to write and for once, nuclear is a subtext. Rather than the context of the book. We are actually looking much more deeply about Iran's national security strategy. And we begin to unpack what asymmetrical warfare really means in terms of Iran's national defense strategy.

Jonathan Well, sadly, my copy hasn't arrived yet. I've ordered it and I can't wait to get my hands on it. It looks fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us today. Really appreciate it. It was very helpful.

Anoush Jonathan, it's been a real pleasure for me to be your guest and honored to be your first guest. So thank you very much. All I can say is that things will now improve from here on,

Jonathan Inshallah to our listeners. Thank you for joining us today. Follow us on social media and subscribe to the show on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. We'll see you next time. Thank you.