**Description**

China has been establishing itself as an economic player in the MENA region, not engaging in any complicated political issues. However, in recent years, China has been increasingly involved in political affairs. They have been engaging with the Arab states as well as the North African Countries.

In this podcast, Jonathan invited Dr. Dawn Murphy, an Associate Professor of International Security Studies at the US Air War College. She specializes in Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics, US-China relations, and international relations. She wrote the book titled “China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order.”

In this episode, they go through a quick summary of her novel and what it's about. They also discussed the forums with which China is affiliated, as well as the goals and objectives of those forums. They also talk about China's connections with non-Arab nations including Turkey, Iran, and Israel. They also covered China's two envoys, the Middle East envoys, and Africa's envoys. They talk about the overviews and the importance of these envoys in China's relations with the region. Finally, they address how the US should think about China's growing influence in the area and how they should interact with China as a competitor.

**Key Takeaways**

* An overview of the Book “China’s Rise in the Global South”
* Elaborating the 2 Cooperation Forums where China is associated with: China-Africa and the China Arab States
* China's Relationship with Non-Arab Countries such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey.
* Mutual Political Support and Interests between China and the Arab World
* The Upcoming Forums of China with Middle East Nations
* New Forms of the BRI: Digital Silk Road and Health Silk Road
* The Two China’s Envoy: Middle East Issues envoy and the Africa Issue envoy
* How should the US interact with the Increasing Influence of China in the region

**Quotes**

*China is not attempting to change the distribution of territory in the Middle East or Africa, as its power grows, it is increasingly competing with the US. - Dawn*

*China's relationship with Israel is a special case. I see no evidence that China is striving to draw them into any sort of cooperative forum. Part of this stems from its long-standing support for Palestinians and desire to be recognized as a balanced player in the region. -Dawn*

*China has a very strong relationship with Israel, as well as the Arab states, as well as Iran and, you know, other players in the region more broadly. And it very much portrays itself as a balanced actor in relation to these issues. - Dawn*

**Special Terms Mentioned in the Episode**

**CASCF** - The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum

**FOCAC** - Forum on China–Africa Cooperation

**PRC** - People’s Republic of China

**SCO** - Shanghai Cooperation Organization

**Global South** - refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

**JCPOA** - The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

**BRI** - Belt and Road Initiative

**Book Mentioned in the Episode**

China’s Rise in the Global South, the Middle East. Africa. And Beijings’ Alternative World Order

Links:

* <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=33516>
* <https://www.amazon.com/Chinas-Rise-Global-South-Alternative/dp/1503630099>
* <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781503630604/html?lang=en>

**Featured in this Episode**

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**Chapters**

00:00 Introduction

02:44 An Overview of Dawn’s Book

08:33 Talking about the Forums: China-Africa and China-Arab

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Transcript

**Jonathan:** Welcome to the China Mina 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. There has long been a perception that China is an economic actor in the Middle East, and North Africa, and that it stays out of messy regional politics. However, China has been engaging more on political issues in recent years. In 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited nine Middle East countries where he offered mediation on the issue of Palestine and Israel and presented the Chinese framework for Gulf security. There have also been several Middle East visits to China so far in 2022, including Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Qatari Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. At the bilateral level, China has been busy, and less noticed. With the institutionalization of China's diplomacy in MENA, along with African and Middle Eastern countries, it has formed two multilateral forums, the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation, or FOCAC, and the China Arab States Cooperation Forum, or CASCF. Beijing has also appointed several special envoys to the Middle East to address threats to peace and security in regional hotspots. To explain how China is developing its political presence in the Middle East, I'm happy to introduce Dr. Dawn Murphy. Dawn is an associate professor of International Security Studies at the U.S. Air War College, where she specializes in Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics. U.S.-China relations and international relations. Her research analyzes China's interests and behavior as a rising global power toward the existing international order. And she has also recently published a fantastic book, China's Rise in the Global South, the Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order with Stanford University Press. And I have it right here because I've been reading it all week and it's really good Dawn. Welcome to the show.

**Dawn: Hey** Jonathan. Thank you for having me.

**Jonathan:** Of course, you're very high on the list of people I want to do this show with. So first I have to ask you about your book. It's a great book. You have to talk about it, have to promote it. Can you give us a brief overview? What were you trying to find out? What questions were you asking with this book? What were some of your key findings? And also, I know you did a lot of fieldwork to write this book. So where did your research take you and who did you talk to?

**Dawn:** Okay. Well, so first, I should say that today any views I express are my own. I am not representing the U.S. government or the Department of Defense. So the book, really the driver of the book, was to better understand China in regions of the world outside of Asia and outside of Sino-American relations. So a lot of the emphasis over the years has been looking at those relationships, but especially since 2002, as China's presence is much more global. It's important to understand how it's operating across functional areas globally. So the questions that drove the book were: What are China's interests in the Middle East and Africa? Is China competing or cooperating with the U.S. in these regions? Is its behavior converging or diverging with the liberal international order? Is China building alternative institutions or an alternative international order? And if it is, what are the characteristics of that order? How does China portray itself as a great power in these regions? And finally, what do all of these things: China's interests, how it's behaving, how it's portraying itself; what does that indicate about its rise globally? So the findings of the book, what I argue is that although China is not attempting to change the distribution of territory in the Middle East or Africa, as its power grows, it is increasingly competing with the U.S. It's building spheres of influence in these regions and it's challenging the rules of the international system by constructing elements of an alternative order to facilitate its interactions. One of the main findings, and I think part of what's most interesting in looking at these regions, is there are significant differences across functional areas. So in the political and economic realm, China is competing, and often that behavior diverges from the liberal order, but it also sometimes is conducted within the liberal order. But you have this tension on the economic and political, including foreign aid. There's a lot of competitive behavior and divergent behavior. But in the security realm, its behavior is primarily cooperative and mostly converges with the liberal order. Another important finding is as the perception of threat from the U.S. is increasing China's competitiveness and norm, divergent behavior is also becoming amplified. So ultimately, you know, about this, the book argues that although China doesn't seek to exist to replace the existing international order, if the order either collapses or unravels or if China is excluded from the order, it's already built many institutions that serve as the foundation of its economic and political and security relations with these regions, as well as a lot of the rest of the developing world. As I'm sure you're aware. And many of these same mechanisms are in place in other regions outside of the Middle East and Africa. You asked about field research. The field research originally was conducted in Beijing. I was a visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, so I conducted a year of interviewing. That was the 2009-2010 timeframe. So even pre-Arab Awakening and my interviews were focused on the U.S. government’s story, Chinese government officials as well as scholars. But I also interviewed a number of embassies representing Middle Eastern and African countries in Beijing. The next phase of the research was in Egypt as a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo. I spent about six months doing similar interviews with Egyptian officials, the African Union, several embassies, scholars, etc. The next phase of research was in Stellenbosch in China. There's a Chinese studies center at Stellenbosch University. So I did some interviewing there. And then after that, I've gone back many times to both China, as well as several Middle Eastern countries, to conduct follow-up interviews and to understand how our relations are changing with the Arab Awakening, and how are they changing with the Belt and Road? How are they changing with increasing tensions in Sino-American relations? So this book is the culmination of almost a decade of work in looking at that and trying to better understand China's roles in these regions in the Global South more broadly.

**Jonathan:** Well, I really can't recommend it highly enough because I think it's an important and useful book. And I'm going to be using it a lot for my research, you know, for this podcast. I should have, like an alternative podcast that's just book talk because I'd love to just talk about this book for an hour, but we kind of have to talk about the China MENA stuff. So, a lot of what you said there leads perfectly into what I want to talk about, which is as you're talking about kind of the shadow order that's being developed where China is building these institutions that could step up should things, you know, falter or weaken. China's positioning itself pretty well. So China is developing, as I said in the intro, its political role in the Middle East. It's worked with these African countries and North African countries in Middle Eastern countries to create these two regional forums, which, I think, don't get paid much attention to when people look at China, and the Middle East. And I think they're quite important and pretty interesting indicators of what's about to happen, you know, over the next few years with these when they have these ministerial meetings. So can you please tell us a little bit about these two forums? How and why were they created?

**Dawn:** So you have two forums. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was created in 2000. It encompasses 53 African states, so the entire continent minus Eswatini. Eswatini continues to recognize Taiwan as opposed to the PRC, but every other country in Africa is encompassed within this forum. In contrast, the China Arab States Cooperation Forum includes the League of Arab States members and China, and it was established in 2004. And as I'll discuss, they share a lot of characteristics in common. But for our discussion, I will keep my comments focused on MENA specifically and the behavior in the forums associated with MENA. So these two organizations serve as the primary multilateral coordination mechanisms for China with the Middle East and with sub-Saharan Africa, and they cover a very broad range of functional issues: economic, political, security, the environment, education, foreign aid, and green technologies, people to people contacts. Pretty much any kind of interaction between two states that you can think of is often covered, you know, under these forums. I do want to focus on a few specific aspects that I think are important to understanding the forums. So first is the political norms underlying both forums are the five principles of peaceful coexistence. So for those of you that aren't as familiar with this, it's the idea of sovereignty, nonintervention, and noninterference, a very strict interpretation of Westphalian sovereignty. The other driving norm underlying both of these forums is South-South cooperation. The desire in this, as you're well aware, ties in with a very long history of China interacting with the Global South, whether it was in the Mao era, you know, or in the more contemporary era, but a focus on shared interests and a desire for countries in these regions to have more of a representation in the current order more broadly. So I would say those are the two underlying norms of both forums. One thing that is a bit more specific to the Arab States Forum as a spur as opposed to FOCAC is support for Palestinians and especially support for Middle East peace broadly defined. So as many of you may be aware, you know, during the Mao era, the PRC had a very strong relationship with the Palestinians, and that changed in the post-Cold War era, where now, ever since 1992, China has had a very strong relationship with Israel, as well as the Arab states, as well as Iran and, you know, other players in the region more broadly. And it very much portrays itself as a balanced actor in relation to these issues, but one very significant issue of concern for Arab states in the Middle East peace process. So this is something that very much is emphasized on the Arab side and that China advocates for through the forums. The flip side of that is in the Arab States Cooperation Forum, China wants broad support for its domestic behavior that falls under the category of nonintervention and noninterference. But the way that it actualizes itself tends to be around activities in Xinjiang and not wanting to have criticism from Middle Eastern states, from Arab states in particular, regarding its behavior in Xinjiang. So those are the political basis in FOCAC, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. There's a lot more activity associated with promoting development. As part of South-South cooperation, there are elements of that in the Middle East as well. But what I've stated is pretty much the underlying political norms relevant for MENA in the economic sphere. There's a very heavy level of state involvement and it's a very robust economic interaction, whether that's trade, investment, infrastructure, energy cooperation, etc... Foreign aid is minimal within the China Arab States Cooperation Forum. You tend to see foreign aid much more implemented via the FOCAC, via the African mechanism, but that is technically in scope. And then on security cooperation, it's not a major focus, but when it comes up, it's about peacekeeping, it's about nuclear nonproliferation. It's about a desire for there not to be terrorism in the national system, but no real concrete cooperation in counterterrorism operations. One thing that I think is very important to note is to think about these forums about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. So FOCAC and the China Arab States Cooperation Forum both started as political and economic organizations, and that is the primary thrust. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is also a cooperation forum, was established in 2001 between China, Russia, and Central Asian states. Its primary driver was in the security realm, so that makes it an outlier, among other cooperation forums globally that China has implemented. But it is interesting to look at it in contrast, because it started with the desire for cooperation among states in that region to combat shared security concerns and to facilitate China, and Russia's cooperation in a post-Cold War environment. And over time, it has evolved to include more of the economic and political realm. But there is more of a security slant compared to these other organizations. You originally asked why these were formed, and so definitely they were formed to provide these very broad multilateral mechanisms for China to interact with these regions broadly, to understand, cross, you know, issues across the regions, to be able to have a unified way in which to communicate with countries in these regions. You know, in my interviews, both at the Arab States Cooperation Forum and the Africa Cooperation Cooperation Forum, there were claims that the African states and the Arab states wanted China to do this. We can debate through you know, I think there was a lot of mutual benefit on both sides of forming these organizations. But regardless of who initiated these have been relatively China-led organizations. And there's a lot of leadership. And also when they emerged in China's cooperation forums more broadly, you can make the argument that they were seeing in some of these regions, especially in Africa, the European Union pursuing cooperation forum type activity, Japan, India, and Turkey. So I think it was seeing the need to go into these regions and have a broader coordinated approach to interact.

**Jonathan:** That was a great overview. In our last episode, we talk with Sajjan Chai about China's soft power in the region, and one of the points that he was bringing up was just that, you know, both China and Middle Eastern countries and societies are starting from kind of a low point of engagement, that it's still early days. So, you know, in educational or cultural or religious outreach or media, you know, there's still a lot that kind of like in the process of developing a more coherent and overarching approach to the region. With these forums, I get the sense, the way you're describing them, that it's similar, although very institutionalized and coordinated, but also kind of developing that presence politically, diplomatically. So, you know, at this point, are they significant or are they just talking shop tours where people get together and, you know, meet each other, or are there actual tangible outcomes that are, you know, coming out of these forums?

**Dawn:** I think they're quite significant. And just like many other regional organizations, whether you think about ASEAN in Southeast Asia or others, there's always the critique that they serve as more talk shops than being formal, you know, institutionalized. And this is because they are less institutionalized, obviously than the European Union or some other organizations. That said, I think it is a lot more than a talk shop from the standpoint of if you look at the ministerial meetings and the summits that are occurring, those occur for FOCAC every three years for the Arab states, every two years at these high-level meetings. I think those do provide an opportunity for leadership from all of the countries involved to communicate, to formulate an action plan. You know, each meeting that they come out with, will have an action plan covering the next number of years before the next meeting. And there tend to be multiple documents generated. There's the declaration that tends to be kind of the high-level political and economic points that they want to emphasize. But the actual action plans have a lot more tangible, concrete behavior that is occurring as a result of the forums. Often that ultimately is executed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education or, you know, other ministries. But I do think that they're coming up with very tangible activities as a result of this interaction, and they use the cooperation forums as a way to publicize what they're doing in a coordinated way. And when you look there are several spin-off meetings and groups that cover many different functional areas that result from that. So it's not just the summits that are not, it's not just the ministerial meetings. But I do think, you know, when you look over time, there are examples where China is inserting verbiage into their public statements that very much appears to result from the interaction that's occurring in these forums. So, one example would be going back to 2010, you had a meeting of the China Arab States Cooperation Forum. And the Arab states very much were encouraging China to have more defined wording regarding East Jerusalem and the Palestinians. Right. And ultimately the declaration, this was at the start of the declarations in those forums, having that much more fine-grained wording associated with it. Right. So, you don't see major policy shifts. But I do think that it's much more than a talk shop, especially if you see these forums as encompassing all of those behaviors, ultimately that they're engaged in the regions and especially the fact that they're using similar blueprints, not just for Arab states and for Africa, but Eastern Europe, for the Caribbean and Latin America, for its relations with other regions. I do think this is a much higher level of institutionalization than you've seen from other great powers, for example, in these regions often. And so I do think it's still not the most formalized that you could have in the world. But I do think that it's significant.

**Jonathan:** That's great. So do you see in your research do these forums result in an increasing political alignment between, you know, China's interests and its Arab partners, countries' interests on certain issues?

**Dawn:** I think in some ways, it's hard to disaggregate how much these cooperation forums are resulting in alignment or how much the cooperation forums are expressing alignment that already exists. Right. So if you think about the underlying norms, again, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, many states within MENA, especially given the colonial history and a particular sensitivity to intervention and interference, share many of these norms to begin with. Right. You look at the Gulf Cooperation Council, you look at the League of Arab States, you know, these are underpinning norms. So I would say those are shared norms from the beginning. That said, as issues develop in the international system, I do think these forums provide an opportunity for the leaders of China as well as the states to interact with them. Right. If you think about especially in a post Arab awakening, post-Libya invasion environment, so think kind of after 2011, you had an uptick in concerns both within China about what this meant for interference and intervention as well as the Arab states. So you see a real amplification of declarations of actions associated with that in these cooperation forums. So again, I think it's a shared interest, to begin with, but this allows the states to come together and have joint statements and express solidarity around these issues. One area which is a bit different would be Syria. So this is something that originally obviously China was involved in the double vetoes in the UN Security Council associated with activities that they saw as violating Syria's sovereignty. And that was not in alignment with the states, many states in the Arab League, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. So that's a case where the two sides saw things differently. But within my interviews, several interviewees brought up the fact that, well, for six months or so, there was a lot of tension in these forums and it was causing a lot of tension between the sides. But we talk through this a lot, and ultimately we have a respect for China's continuity and consistency in those norms, and essentially they agreed to disagree. So that was how it occurred within the forums. But you see these follow-up actions by China of establishing a special envoy for Syria attempting to contribute to stability there. And I think that very much, again, it's pursuing activities that they see. Syria was an important hot spot both to them as well as to these Arab states. And so it took tangible actions to address that. So I do again, as I said at the beginning, you know, how much of the alignment is as a result of the forums and how much of it is that these states more broadly in their national system, are having more shared interests, especially about certain developments in the international system? More broadly, it's hard to desegregate that, but I do think ultimately it provides them an opportunity to communicate with each other and understand each other's views and attempt to have a unified voice on issues.

**Jonathan:** So that's interesting because I've done a lot of research on China's strategic partnership diplomacy in the region. You know, China doesn't pursue alliances, but it does pursue these partnerships. And you'll find them engaging with countries where there are issues where their interests diverge. And what you often find is they say, well, look, this isn't something kind of like what you described with Syria, where we're not going to see eye to eye on this for a while. But let's put it on the back burner and focus on those things that are important to both of us that we can build cooperation on and build trust and get to know each other better on issues that matter, more pressing issues. And then we can revisit this later. And I think the way you describe, you know, China's approach to Syria is quite similar in that regard. And it's also interesting because just the name of the CASCF, that second word Arab, tells us a lot about it. It focuses on Arab countries in the Middle East. And, of course, you know, three very important countries, Israel, Iran and Turkey aren't included in this. Do you see in China's bilateral relations with those countries other similar paths of engagement between China and Iran or China and Turkey or China? Israel. Are they excluded for reasons other than Sino Arab cooperation, or is this because of, you know, regional issues, and poor relations with other Middle Eastern countries? What is that? Why? Why? Arab states cooperation forum?

**Dawn:** Okay. So first I should say that as far as my analysis goes, China right now has very strong relations, with both of the Arab states, as well as Israel, Turkey, and Iran, and, as you know, very robust economic, political, etc. Right. Specifically to your question, the Arab States Cooperation Forum, as opposed to the FOCAC, actually was directly established with the League of Arab States. And so it very much was structured in that way where FOCAC when it originally was formed, was not with the African Union. The African Union is now technically a member, but it has 53 states with China in the cooperation. So from its beginning, the design of the China Aerospace Cooperation Forum was a bit different and part of the idea was that the Arab states could provide a unified voice. They could have a bit more leverage in their negotiations with China around these issues. They could advocate for projects that would span countries and that would benefit the Arab world more broadly. So that very much was the origins specifically about the other countries that you mentioned. Iran, really the way China has been encompassing them has been through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. So over the years, the SCO has expanded to include India as well as Pakistan. And this last summer, for several years, Iran has expressed a desire to be part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was implemented several years ago. China's stance was that you couldn't have a state join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization if they were under U.N. sanctions, U.N. Security Council sanctions with JCPOA, with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Those sanctions were lifted. So technically Iran could apply. But there's been several years where SCO meets every year. So it's been several years since then that Iran has expressed a very strong desire to apply to be a formal member. And China has hesitated and not encouraged that this year they consented to both China and Russia, consented to Iran pursuing formal membership. So how they're encompassing Iran into a cooperation organization would be in the SCO. Turkey is a dialogue partner of the SCO and I am not familiar with the degree to which they want to be a formal member in the future. But I would suspect from a Chinese perspective it would make a lot more sense to encompass them into s-so from a geographical standpoint than to try to bring them into an Arab state's configuration. That said, Iran and Turkey both, as you know, have strategic partnerships with China in the same way that, you know, Arab states, many Arab states do as well. Israel is a special case, I would say, in a few ways. So one is that I do not see any indication of China attempting to bring them into any cooperation forum configuration. I think there are several drivers for that and they're very similar to the reason that China has not pursued a strategic partnership with Israel despite many of the characteristics of its relationship being very similar to the other countries in the region that it's established. So I think part of this is very much in alignment with its longer-term historical support for the Palestinians and wanting to be seen as a balanced actor and the potential perceptions of other states in the region. Although that is changing, right. But historically, the perception of other states in the region of having a strategic partnership with Israel could send certain signals that they were not wanting. The Chinese weren't necessarily wanting to engage. And it's that said, you know, in my interview with the Israeli government officials, etc., I did not sense that there's this feeling of exclusion. Right. I think there's an understanding that China is wanting to appear to be a balanced actor and is not wanting to engage in behavior that potentially could cause concerns in other parts of the region. And I do think in several issue areas, outside of the Strategic Partnerships and Cooperation Forums, China, you know, engages Israel robustly across functional areas. And even as far as free trade agreements, they've announced that they're pursuing a negotiating a free trade agreement with Israel. But at the same time, they announced a free trade agreement with the Palestinians and with Palestine. Right. So that's a way to express both a desire to be a balanced actor, to support the economic development of a less developed country, and to do that in a way that all sides could agree was a productive action. So it is again. So Israel would be the only country on your list that I would say is kind of excluded. And despite that, China has very strong and productive relationships with them as well.

**Jonathan:** Yeah, that's interesting because when I think especially of Turkey, right, as a NATO partner and we've heard Erdogan say at different points over the past, say seven or eight years, that, you know, maybe the SCO would be a better fit given the tensions between Turkey and Europe. But I always wonder if that's just faint. Towards China to, you know, extract concessions or whatever. With Israel, I always wonder, you know, kind of the cynical international relations scholar in me thinks that you know, you'll see China expressing a lot of support for Palestine on issues that matter to a lot of Arab countries like you described earlier. And then essentially, you've got a bloc of 22 countries that are going to support you and other international fora. And, you know, you see this play out time and again, like the letter of support for China's policies in Xinjiang. And I don't know if there's a direct quid pro quo, but it does seem to me that there might be a relation between, you know, Chinese political support for things that matter to the League of Arab States and then the League of Arab States offering China support in something that doesn't matter to them so much either.

**Dawn:** Yeah. And especially on the Xinjiang issue, I mean, this goes back quite away, right? So ever since the founding of the forum of the China Overseas Cooperation Forum in 2004, this desire for respect for sovereignty, which very much that this issue falls within that that you saw in 2009 when you had riots that broke out in Xinjiang. There was a very active effort on the part of Chinese diplomats to reach out to the members of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum to ensure there was no criticism in that there was an understanding on their part of what was occurring internally. You've seen similar behavior in Xinjiang. And I would agree with you that the letter that does not explicitly say support for Xinjiang or what it says is support for China's broader human rights record was a response to a very direct Xinjiang letter that occurred a few days before. I do think very much that this is a manifestation of this broader effort by China through the cooperation forums, but through their bilateral relations with countries in the region as well. And I think there are several reasons that we don't have enough time to discuss today. But I think there are several reasons why countries in the region, especially Arab states, have stayed relatively quiet on these issues. But, yes, I would agree.

**Jonathan:** Yeah, I know every webinar I do, it seems to come up. I know it's something that people want to think a lot about. And I think that the Turkey dynamic fits into this a bit as well because, you know, Turkey has had pretty frosty relations with a lot of Sunni majority countries in the Middle East. And as a result, it hasn't fit into a Middle Eastern country, you know, what China tries to achieve with Belt and Road especially is, you know, creating these regional networks. And within the Middle East, China, and Turkey don't connect as well as other countries might. So the fact that Turkey, the wiggers are ethnically Turkic and this is, you know, a point that the Turkish leaders have to bring up every time they see China. It seems, you know, it doesn't seem to cost China too much to keep Turkey on the outside of some of its bigger Middle East objectives. You're right. We could this could be like a three-hour episode, but we've got to stick to the script here. So this is 2022. I know it's hard to measure the years these days, but that means if I'm counting right that there's going to be a CASCF ministerial meeting this summer. Right? They're held every two years. I believe this year it should be held in China if the pattern holds. What is the significance of these ministerial meetings?

**Dawn:** As I said previously, you know, these minister meetings are the highest level of engagement that for the China of States Cooperation Forum occurs every two years. One thing that I think will be interesting to look at is what happens in August or, you know, in the fall, coming up with this next cooperation forum. We just last year in 2021 had the most recent FOCAC, right? And so, of course, that happened in the middle of COVID. It happened in a room, you know, a remote virtual environment. But one thing that you did see in that was shifting away from not completely away from but away from a bit some of the more traditional, whether it be infrastructure, you know, economic engagement, but into two newer areas that these cooperation forms have encompassed for a very long time. Right. But a lot more stress on the health of Silk Road, on COVID mitigation efforts, on high tech interaction, on people, people contacts. So, you know, you could see a lot of that as just a symptom of what's occurring in COVID more broadly. Right. It is harder to conduct the traditional interactions that China's been engaged in in these regions. But I also think, though, before COVID in Africa, which applies to North Africa as well, I think there was a realization among Chinese leadership that they needed to be looking at Belt and Road and they needed to be looking at their broader engagement in making sure that projects were profitable or that projects were not causing debt issues, or that projects were sustainable or that they were meeting the needs. Right. So there was increasing criticism coming both from civil society actors within Africa more broadly, but also from the U.S. and other countries around Belt and Road. And so you saw this real slowdown in activity that was occurring before Belt and Road, but as exhibited by China's clamping down on its capital controls in 2016. So you started to see a decrease in investment associated with that. And then you saw a lot of rhetoric and a lot of, I think, efforts on the part of China to try to ensure that projects were high quality and sustainable going forward. And so I would expect we're likely going to see more of that about the China Arab States Cooperation Forum as well. So you could see a bit of shifting to maybe a bit less focus on some of the more traditional infrastructure connectivity, although that's still going to be there. But focusing more on these other functional areas that have become so important during the pandemic. And so I would expect that there also appear to be some positive developments on the horizon regarding the Gulf Cooperation Council and their free trade agreement negotiations that have been, as I'm sure you're aware, have been in process since 2004. And then there's always these rumors that it's going to be signed soon. It's going to be formalized soon, you know. But the most recent road bump and that was really more of a kind of a split within the GCC and then that appears to be getting a bit better right now. So I wouldn't be surprised if we start to see some kind of, you know, real activity related to that, you know, more of a focus on regional approaches in that way. So I'm not saying there's going to be a downtick in overall activity, but I would expect that that that will be an issue. It'll also be interesting to see what's emphasized about Ukraine. And so I'm not a specialist on Ukraine, but as I mentioned earlier in the show, there's a lot of shared interests and you had a lot of common voting behavior in the US and whether it be the U.N. Security Council or the younger between China and several countries within the Middle East. Right. So that I assume behind closed doors will be a major issue of discussion. But the degree to which it manifests itself in the official declarations will be interesting to see. We've got a very fluid international dynamic right now and I'm quite curious to see what comes out of those meetings.

**Jonathan:** You and me both, but I couldn't agree more. I think you'll see a lot of those big splashy infrastructure projects that we kept hearing about, you know, up until about 2017, 2018, and especially, you know, with pandemic economies and the problems that a lot of countries were facing. I did a lot of webinars and different events where everybody kind of assumed that BRI was dead because BRI was so directly linked in a lot of people's thinking too, you know, ports and pipelines and in these big things. But you're right, you know that how deftly they the income they, you know, brought in the health Silk Road and the digital Silk Road and those two things are driving a lot of what China is doing in the region, especially here in the Gulf, as a lot of countries with labor issues are looking to find ways to address that without bringing a lot of expensive people like me, you know, foreigners who create social issues or. Political? Well, any number of issues. Well, if you can digitize and if you can address those issues with some of this AI or tech that China's using for a lot of its smart cities. And, you know, I think this is going to be what we should expect to see a lot of. And you're right, I think this meeting is probably in August, I'm excited to see what comes out of it because they don't get paid a lot of attention. But there's always, always something. And it doesn't get the headlines, but there's always something that gives you a sense of what's going to be driving the relations for the next two years. And I think the China watchers are watching that.

**Dawn:** And want about that. One thing I would keep an eye on, as you said, many are speculating that BRI may be dead. I don't think the BRI0 is dead. I think it might be rebranded. I think they might have a lot of motivation to start calling it different things because by itself it has become such a target of criticism within the region and more broadly.

**Jonathan:** But yeah, I agree. You know, it was always such a fuzzy concept, you know, like nobody. Everything could be a boring project. And a lot of folks would describe that to me as one of its weaknesses. And I thought that was a strength because it can be a constantly changing, you know, set of initiatives. And I think that's what we're seeing right now is BRI 2.0 where it's focusing on more, you know, these types of issues that maybe are a little less cost-intensive and also address a lot of the development issues or health issues that face a lot of these countries. Um, but on a different note, I mentioned at the beginning that China has another political arrow in its quiver, that it's introduced in the region, and that that's the use of these special envoys typically on these hotspot issues, where China wants to be seen to be a responsible, great power that's contributing to regional public goods. Can you give us just kind of a brief overview, of what these envoys are, what they do, and how effective are they in helping China develop this political presence?

**Dawn:** So China's established two envoys specifically dealing with the Middle East. So one was established in 2002 and it's the Middle East issues envoy. It focuses on contributing to Middle East peace more broadly. So it very much presents itself, as you said, as a balanced actor, as a responsible stakeholder in these issues. But China's not offering its solutions necessarily. Its primary goal is just to bring sides together because it sees itself as opposed to some other great powers, as not having the baggage in the region, and that it could be possibly a liaison between states to address the Middle East issue. Middle East peace issue. So that's one that I'm happy to go into more detail regarding what they advocate for, but I think it's important to think about them in comparative contexts. So the next one was established in 2016 and it focuses on Syria. And I'll say a bit more about that because I think on the Middle Eastside, it's pretty obvious what the interests are there. It's pretty clear-cut Middle East peace. Syria was a little bit different from a hotspot issue because it was newly emerging. So my understanding of the reason why China has pursued this one was they did not want the Syrian civil war to spill over into other countries in the region. And so they saw the Syrian civil war as potentially causing a lot of interstate rivalry and conflict, etc... But another piece, as you've already mentioned, they saw it as an opportunity, especially in the context of some of their differing views with Arab states. In particular, they saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate that they were being a responsible actor. Another significant driver for establishing that envoy was China's concerns about external support for what they view as insurgency activity in Xinjiang. So in Syria, this very much relates to the Turkistan Islamic Party and the activities that form a Chinese government perspective, they're very worried about material support coming in. So they see the envoy as a way to try to resolve that issue in the longer term. And then another piece of it is the ability to provide humanitarian assistance and aid in Syria's reconstruction more broadly going forward. So these were the motivators. And so what they've done that they set up originally they had there the Middle East issues envoy dealing with this, and it pretty much drowned out a lot of the Middle East peace process issues to deal with Syria. So they established a separate envoy who has been participating in essentially all multilateral mechanisms. Right. You know, whether that's Geneva, Astana, or Vienna or, you know, they've been kind of an equal opportunity participant in these various forums. Right. But again, they see themselves as trying to encourage the use of multilateral mechanisms to bring sides together to ultimately, hopefully, you know, have the civil war completely resolved. The other envoy, that's not as relevant, but I think it's still important for states in the Middle East is the Africa issues envoy that was established in 2006. So that originally was formed to work on the resolution of the Darfur issue. And then in the early 20 tens, it changed form to focus on South Sudan and the issues associated with the creation of South Sudan and then tensions between Sudan and South Sudan. That one, as opposed to the two Middle Eastern envoys, very much was at the urging of the international community. If you think back to 2006, there was a lot of criticism of China for its behavior in Darfur. It very actively wanted to cooperate with Western states, you know, very much as opposed to the Middle East. Focused envoys arguably were much more at the urging of Arab states and issues internally within the regions. So that's, you know, at a high level what those envoys are and then the purpose.

**Jonathan:** There are so many questions I want, but we're running out of time. I could just ask you stuff all day. It's fascinating. But I guess just to kind of get to the last question, because of course, a lot of our audience is listening from, you know, the U.S., I assume looking at the stats on our website here, it seems to be the case. So based on that, how do you think the U.S. policy community should be thinking about China's diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, especially during this era of strategic competition? You know, in your first comments, you talked about norms divergence and norm convergence, which I really think is a great way to look at it, rather than the typical status quo or revisionist framework. Because with that, you've got a binary China's either with you or they're against you, and they want to change things or they want to keep them the way they are. And the great thing about your book, this contribution is just showing that uncertain, as you say, functional areas. There are places where U.S. and Chinese interests will line up in those others where they don't. So just taking that into account, you know, as China's developing a bigger diplomatic presence, how should the U.S. be thinking about this?

**Dawn:** So there are two things I want to highlight. So one is I think we need to think about how China portrays itself as a great power in these cooperation forums through the special envoys, etc... So really the way it portrays itself is as a defender of sovereignty, a champion of development and South-South cooperation, a promoter of connectivity, and a power that leverages multilateral institutions. You know, whether that's for Middle East peace, U.N. peacekeeping operations, you know, other behavior, it portrays itself as a balanced actor and that it has a lack of colonial history in this region. So I think the U.S. needs to think through how to respond to each of those issues. Right. Because in many ways, they're trying to differentiate themselves from the U.S. and the West, defending sovereignty versus evolving norms of sovereignty that have a lot more interference and, you know, picking winners and losers within borders. Right. So they're differentiating them on that. The South-South cooperation, these are interests that they share broadly across these regions. Right. So I've looked off the areas, but I think we need to rather than focus on all of the negatives of China's engagement, you know, for example, that the US government has had several comments regarding concerns about debt, diplomacy, and coercive activity and, you know, other behavior that diverges from some of our norms. And I'll talk a bit on the convergence and divergence piece because I think it's important as well. But I think from a U.S. government standpoint, it's important to understand what China's doing wrong, but also what China's doing right, because I think what China's doing right and a lot of these norms and a lot of this way in which it portrays itself, I think it's got a lot of traction in the Middle East, in sub-Saharan Africa, in much of the developing world. And so if this is a competition more broadly for partners in the international system, there's a lot that China is doing right. And I think we focus on the negative side too much. The other piece, and it's related to that would be about convergence or divergence from the Liberal international order. And it is important to distinguish that from the US because just like any other great power, the US and other great powers often also engage in behavior that diverges from the order. But there are several areas where China may be competing with the US or cooperating, but it's doing it within the confines of the existing order. You see this, particularly in the security realm, peacekeeping operations, anti-piracy, you know, wanting to use multilateral mechanisms, wanting to use the UN to try to resolve disputes, etc. So I think that offers some opportunities for cooperation between the US and China potentially in this era of increasing tensions in the economic and political realm. I think areas where China's behavior converges with the liberal order also provide potential opportunities, you know, so some examples are in their trade with the least developed countries in the world. They provide tariff, a tariff-free treatment that's very much in alignment with the norms of the international system. That's something the U.S. and China could cooperate on. They're pursuing free trade agreements in the same way that the US's, etc. That's very much a World Trade Organization complaint. They're advocating for, you know, multilateralism in many ways and the political realm. So again, I think and there's not enough time to go into all the details of this, I think we need to think through what about China's behavior converges with some of the values that we hold most dear from a U.S. perspective and think through the ways in which cooperation could occur, but also sometimes think through the ways in which even within the liberal international order, they are competing. So if you look, you know, within the World Bank, within the IMF, there's a number of areas where China's not wanting to overthrow the system. It just wants to change its representation or its representation of other developing countries to have more of a voice. So I think we need to understand those nuances in order to interact with China as a great power more broadly.

**Jonathan:** That was really great. I mean, there's so much to talk about just in this and we don't have the time. But, you know, one of the distinctions you make, I think that's great in your book is an international order and Liberal International Order. And China, of course, I think, is a champion of international order. It's benefited tremendously from this, you know, post-World War Two order. I think it's the liberal norms inherent in what a lot of Western countries are promoting, where you see a divergence. But I think if you remove that normative element, which of course for us being liberals from the West, it's a little hard to do. But you'll see again what you're describing where China's interest in international cooperation aligns with a lot of the global south. And that's something I think that's a really great point you make, you know, like this strategic empathy for people in London. You see Ottawa think. Why? Why do people Nazi China the way we do and to try to think that through, I think would be a very valuable exercise. This has really been great. I could talk for hours about this stuff. I'm going to put a link to your book on our show page. It's a really fantastic book. Like I said at the beginning, I think people who do China, Mina, will find this really valuable. People who do China's global sales will find it really valuable. It's just really, really good work. To our audience, thank you for joining us. Follow us on social media. Subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. And we'll see you next show. Thank you very much