

Description

Many nations with interests in the Middle East are now reevaluating their strategies in light of China's rise as a key player in the region. Governments and businesses in the MENA region did not have to think much about China until recently. The last ten years have seen a significant change in that. And whether you're talking about commerce, investment, security, development, or diplomacy, the subject of what Beijing thinks is one that is constantly raised. Additionally, this is complicated by China's difficult interactions with numerous international events and economies.

In today's podcast, we are joined by Camille Lons. Camille is a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies or IISS. She will discuss how Europeans see China as China is now rising as a big player in geopolitics in the MENA region and the world.

Takeaways

How does the EU respond to the rising influence of China in the MENA region and the world?
The areas where the EU and China can cooperate in the MENA region
How does the EU position itself in the US-China geopolitical rivalry
Why does China still have a strong influence in the region despite warnings given by Western countries?

Quotes

*The Europeans realized how dependent they were on China during COVID when it came to their supply chains, and this acted as a wakeup call that they were now vulnerable to rising authoritarian powers - **Camille***

*The EU and China can really cooperate when talking about clean energy infrastructures in the MENA region. - **Camille***

*The EU is trying to position itself as a third party in the US-China rivalry. It means that other nations have the opportunity to choose the EU as a partner over the US and China. - **Camille***

*One of the concerns of the EU about China's presence in MENA is that China is the provider of development finance in the region and this might raise some concerns such as humanitarian issues, labor issues and below standard practices - **Camille**.*

Featured in this Episode

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Transcript

Jonathan Fulton: Welcome to the China Mena Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist outside University and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. China's emergence as a major actor in the Middle East changes the strategic calculation for a lot of countries with an interest in the region. Not long ago, governments and companies operating in the MENA didn't have to give China that much thought. That has changed dramatically over the last decade. And what does Beijing think is a question that frequently comes up, whether you're talking about trade, investment, security, development, or diplomacy? And this is more complex given the tense relations between China and many events and economies around the world. Joining us today to give us a European perspective on China-Mena relations is Camille Lons. Camille is a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies or less and has long been based in the Middle East office in Bahrain. Although she's currently working from Taipei, she covers political and security developments in the Gulf region with a specific focus on Gulf countries, economic and political relations with Asian powers, and the Horn of Africa. Prior to this, she worked for the European Council on Foreign Relations. She has spent a lot of time thinking, writing, and talking about China in the Middle East. Camille, welcome to the show.

Camille Lons: Thank you for having me.

Jonathan Fulton: Of course. Couldn't wait to have you join us. So let's start with a big picture by looking at the EU China relations in general over the past few years. Europe had a reevaluation of its approach to the PRC. We've seen this year the 17 plus one formulation of the

17 Central and Eastern European countries that worked with China became the 16 plus one, with Lithuania withdrawing earlier this year. The EU China summit in April really emphasized how far apart the two have gone in recent years. So tell us, how does Europe see China both within Europe and globally, and what's driving these perceptions?

Camille Lons: You're right. It's been changing quite rapidly in recent years. The fact that they are European countries have been like looking at China as a challenge increasingly and we've seen an emerging consensus as well between European countries, which was not the case for quite some time and quite, quite recently, because until recently you had, for example, countries like Germany who have like quite important economic interests in China and so didn't want to harm the relationship with China. France also had a good economic interest in China, but there was also a geopolitical element of a bit where they were trying to develop this idea of European strategic autonomy away from the US. And so China was also part of that picture, and of course, and you mentioned it, but there are also all the other countries that are a bit more on the margins of Europe's economic and political center of gravity. The smaller countries in the east of Europe, in the south of Europe that also had some of their issues as well with Brussels and were looking at China as a way to attract new investments and to broaden a bit there the margin of maneuver towards Brussels by having this new partner. And in recent years we've seen that evolving. There's been a bit of disappointment and frustration from some of these countries that were hoping to attract Chinese investments. Some of them also, and as you say, in the case of Lithuania, have been subject to pressures and sanctions from the Chinese. And so there has been in recent years really a growing concern about China's footprint in Europe and what that could mean exactly for European unity. And that has been accelerating, really, with the COVID crisis and now with also the context of the Ukrainian crisis at the moment of COVID. That has been the way Beijing has been handling the situation, also supporting disinformation campaigns in Europe on the pandemic. That has really changed the way Europeans were looking at China in terms of its reliability as a crisis actor. But also COVID kind of acted as a wake-up call a bit for the Europeans in terms of their realizing how dependent their supply chains were on China and the kind of vulnerability that could create. And so that has only increased with the Ukraine crisis, where you have that realization that the Europeans are framing this crisis as this idea that Europe and its values, the values of defense, are being threatened by the rise of authoritarian powers, whether it's Russia or China. And there is this idea that globalization and trade links and connectivity don't necessarily bring peace and prosperity but that they can also become a source of vulnerability, especially for democracies. And so there is what the EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, called the geopolitical awakening of Europe, and that was towards Russia. But I think it's actually the Ukraine crisis that is also having a big impact on the way Europeans look at their relations with China as well. And we're seeing the Europeans developing some tools and mechanisms to try to respond to that challenge, whether it is, you know, some anti coercion incursion instruments, the Global Get Away initiative, that is an attempt to respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the fact that a number of European countries and the EU as well have published Indo-Pacific strategies, negative as well mentioned China for the first time this year as a threat. And it's a strategic concept. So you have really liked a very rapid evolution of the perception of China and of how the EU and European countries should be responding to that. That said, I would just nuance this a bit as well because there is

still this willingness among European countries to avoid getting dragged into a US-China confrontation as well. And they have always tried to position themselves a bit as a kind of third party. Third position. And this, at the moment, is made a bit harder by the Ukraine crisis because it has been really reinforcing the trans-Atlantic partnership and then later. But some countries and especially France. Emmanuel Macron was really attached to this idea of the strategic autonomy of the Europeans. And this idea that even if the relationship with the US is getting better under Biden's administration, you never know what can happen after. And there is still this traumatic bias of the Trump administration that has been a bit of a wake-up call for European countries on this idea that the Europeans need to really define what their interests are and protect their strategic interests themselves as well. Without trying not to get caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the US-China rivalry.

Jonathan Fulton: Sure. That's a fantastic overview. You know, when you're talking about how maybe the promise of China, Europe, you know, be our cooperation, under-delivered, it just made me think of a friend I have from Bulgaria who is doing a research project. And we're talking about four or five years ago. And he surveyed a lot of people in central Eastern Europe and with very general questions, you know, which country is the biggest source of investment into, you know, your country, which country is the most dominant economic actor? And, you know, really high numbers like 80, 90% were responding to China across the board. And then he showed them the actual data and it was almost all EU. And China was a very minor actor. And I think people were really projecting a lot of, you know, maybe as media accounts or hopes of, you know, these ideas of Chinese as we're going to be transformative. But, you know, like you're describing, I think what we've seen is that it's much more nuanced and complex.

Camille Lons: So it is the same issue that we have them in the MENA region as well.

Jonathan Fulton: But well, that's exactly where I'm going now. Just looking specifically at China in the Middle East, obviously, this is a region that's quite consequential for the EU. So how does China's growing presence in the region affect the EU's interests? Does it change the landscape? And, you know, are people in Europe thinking of China's presence as a threat or an opportunity or something in between the two?

Camille Lons: Yeah, I mean, the MENA region is super important for the EU and that's why also the Europeans are a bit careful of not defining their interests independently from the US because the US has its own set of interests in the MENA region of China as well. But both China and the US are quite far away from what's happening in the MENA region. And so any political instability, any crisis in the MENA region has direct impacts on European countries. The whole issue about migration coming from the region or refugee flows coming from the region has been a big element in internal politics in Europe, especially with the rise of sorry populist parties. Right. In Europe and the. And so it has become really like a domestic question, everything related to the MENA region. And on top of that, you have the fact that the EU is still dependent on energy flows coming from the Gulf. They are very dependent on all the trade,

maritime trade routes passing through the Suez Canal. You have 40% of the trade between Europe and Asia passing through that waterway. So everything happening in that region is really Germany targeting and having consequences in Europe when it comes to exactly what China is doing in the region and how this is really impacting directly their interests. This is a topic that is only now starting to make its way among European policymakers. It's quite a new topic. Until now, the focus was on me either on what China was doing in the EU or on what was happening in the region. But there was quite little thinking about what China was doing in the region and how that could affect European interests. And it also depends a lot on each European country that has their own set of interests. I would say the main kind of concern would be the first one is always the economic competition lens. They've been of course, they have big economic interests in that region. It's a big market for them. They make important investments. So they look a bit concerned about the areas where China and Chinese companies can be competing with European companies. So, for example, that the French have been pushing back quite, quite a lot on the attempts by Chinese companies to make headway in the automobile, in the manufacturing industry, and in the Algerian miracle, for example, or on digital infrastructures. Huawei was competing directly with Finnish and Swedish companies, Nokia and Ericsson on the renewable energy projects. For example, wind power plants, German, Spanish, and French companies are also in direct competition with the Chinese companies. Do you have a lot of areas of potential economic competition for Chinese companies? But it doesn't mean, the Europeans don't necessarily see that as particularly strategic and having like importance, security ramification. It's one player, it's one competitor, among others when it comes to infrastructure as actually sometimes the competitors tend to be more the Japanese or the Koreans than the Chinese companies that don't necessarily compete on the same economic segments as Chinese companies. So I wouldn't say that's one element, but I wouldn't say it's a very important one. Another element where the Europeans started looking at Chinese influence with a bit more concerns is more on China's role as a provider of development, finance and development aid in a number of these countries, because the Europeans are the biggest providers of humanitarian and development aid to that region, it's a very big part of their neighborhood policy. It's a big part of. Stabilizing the region to make sure that to avoid any spillover effects on their own security. So it's very important. And so they look with a bit of concern at Chinese development, finance, that doesn't always align with the kind of standards that they have and in terms of governance or human rights issues or even in terms of, I would say, environmental standards. So this is something where they look a bit concerned with what China is doing because they fear that this is kind of eroding a little bit the influence they could have in trying to condition the aid that we're providing to the region for reforms, economic reforms or governance reforms. And, of course, if China is providing some development support with these types of conditions, it's making it harder to have this kind of negotiations. So there is a bit of that question around how this is eroding their margin of maneuver when it comes to influencing the development of the region. Then I would say there is the defense and security sector kind of an area where. This is more, I would say the US is the one that has been really pushing this idea that we need to be more careful about what China is doing in the region, what security ramifications there could be. The Europeans are a bit less concerned than the US on this kind of issue, but they start watching what's happening. They watch especially China's presence around the Suez Canal, all the developments and investments in infrastructure and

industrial cars that have been made around that area, because that's a very important area for the Europeans. The French, for example, have a base in Djibouti and in the UAE. So they've been looking quite closely at what the Chinese base in Djibouti was about. And when there was the rumor of a logistical facility in the UAE, they've been also looking quite, quite closely at what that could be. So but again, they're a bit skeptical in terms of what that could be like, how that could really impact their interest directly. They don't really believe, on the contrary of the US, that China is interested or even able to weaponize this kind of a presence or influence to try to, I don't know, to weaponize it against European interests. They did, they did. The thing is that the Chinese themselves need that freedom of navigation around the Suez Canal in that area. So it's not in the interests of China to disrupt this in any way. And the Europeans are actually probably more concerned, not really about China, but and the US reaction and like in case of a US-China escalation, like how that could ultimately impact their interests there and the freedom of navigation in that area and, and access to important facilities or infrastructures. So that's the European position. And I would add the last point that people don't usually discuss too much, but it's less about what the impact on the Middle East could be, but more about how China's influence in the Middle East can translate into the Indo-Pacific theater or on international forums like how China can leverage its influence towards Middle Eastern countries to get support on international and on the international stage. We've seen that already. You're some of the many of the countries actually have been supporting China publicly on it's on the bigger issue they could be supporting. It's more on Taiwan or on the South China Sea. Some of them have been, for example, so-called drafting or supporting Chinese resolutions. And there's one interesting example. The one UN instance that regulates global Internets to try to push for reference in favor of a more regulated intranet by it by governments. So there, there are these, these areas. And when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, we see it today with the crisis in Ukraine. But there is this question of where would the countries stand in case of a full on escalation and how that would impact European interests in the Indo-Pacific, and especially for those who export energy to Asia. And we see already with the Ukraine crisis the kind of issues we could have and the kind of ramifications it could have on other geopolitical theaters than the Middle East.

Jonathan Fulton: Okay. So, yeah, the part that I thought that was interesting is when you're talking about the developmental challenge and also how you see a lot of Middle East countries cooperating with China in multilateral forums. And I think these two things are very, very closely connected because it hasn't really been noticed much yet. But China announced last year this new, you know, there's the digital Silk Road, there's the Belt and Road, there's the Health Silk Road, and there's all these different initiatives. But last year they announced the Global Development Initiative. And this is something that I'm actually writing a paper on right now. So I've been thinking a lot these days. But what you see, I think, especially in the Middle East, is there's a lot of issues where Western countries have these universal, you know, these presumed universal norms that drive a lot of how we do things, especially in the development sector. And China and a lot of Middle Eastern countries reject this notion that's universal, that these norms are very Western, you know, preferences, whether it's in terms of governance with democracy being the ideal or you. Men's rights or gender equality or free media or any number of issues. A lot of countries in the region don't accept that premise, and China also doesn't accept that premise. And I think what we've seen, especially since the end of the Cold War, was

during the Cold War, if countries didn't want to get aid or development, you know, from the West that they always had. You know, the Soviet bloc that they could turn to. But the Soviets collapsed. And there's only one game in town. And everybody had to try to twist themselves into knots to go to the west. And what we've seen with China, especially since, you know, the BRI was announced, is China's offering an alternative. But it doesn't necessarily mean people like what China has to offer. But they like having that alternative. They like having the choice in which China says, look, if there's no conditionality, if you want money, we'll send you the money. We're not going to talk to you about environmental protection reports. We're going to talk to you about, you know, transparency in hiring or any of these things. It makes it really hard for other countries to compete with this that we've seen. You know, you brought up the bigger issue, and I don't think that many countries or governments of the developing world necessarily support it. But they're willing to sign these statements to say, look, why shut the door in China and sell them on, you know, something that they consider core interest, their domestic political conditions, whether it's Tibet or Jinjiang or Hong Kong or Taiwan. If you consider Taiwan a domestic issue, I haven't lived in Taiwan for quite a while. But, you know, you can see how a lot of countries look at the way China does this stuff and say, look, this aligns with our concerns about our own domestic political pressures or domestic development issues. And I think it makes it a much more challenging environment, you know, for, you know, Western agencies to try to convince people that, no, no, no, you should do it our way because our ways, you know, it's better for you. How do you think we meet that challenge?

Camille Lons: I completely agree with you. And actually, I'm currently writing a paper with one of my colleagues on the Gulf Aid as well as the region. That is actually I mean, Gulf countries are actually sometimes the bigger investors and providers of development finance than China in many countries of the region. And also poses the same question to European partners or other multilateral financial institutions or development institutions on how to cooperate with these countries, when sometimes they don't always come with exactly the same standards and values attached to the packages. I think that the key for the Europeans when it comes to competing with China or addressing the question of China in the region is also working on the counter-narrative that they offer to or to the right, because at the end of the day, it's also a question of narratives. And a lot of the relationship between the Europeans and many countries is marked by a history of colonial relations, especially for countries like France or the UK. And so the relationship is very tainted by these or by the past. And it makes European demands when it comes to human rights or governance reforms perceived as being very hypocritical and patronizing by some countries in the region. And so how do you also change some of the narrative that you have without completely changing the values you're promoting? The reason why the Europeans are promoting democracy is not just for democracy, but because they believe that democracy and the rule of law are very important for long term development and stability. And so if they want to build stability in that part of the world, they believe that it has to pass through also promoting some of these values. So it's not just an ideological question, but there is a way to, there's probably a way to present it and to sell it to these countries and to try to revamp it a bit. That's the narrative that we put forward when addressing these countries. And maybe this narrative of autocracies versus democracies is probably not the best one for the Europeans to use when it comes to the region.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I agree. I think there's always been a lot of moralizing and a little bit of, you know, maybe. Ignorance is a lot of Western countries of how we are seen in most of the rest of the world. You know that that will keep putting things like colonialism back centuries in our minds, like, oh, that was so long ago. And you know, obviously we know people if you live in countries in the developing world, you've met people who suffered under this. So it's not a distant memory. So when we talk about liberal values and democracy, I absolutely agree. You know, the hypocrisy of it really kind of makes the message what you're saying that, you know, long term stability and, you know, the good things that can come of it gets lost in this, you know, really clumsy messaging. Oh, but anyhow, back to China in the Middle East, you know, when Europeans are looking at the region, of course, you've done a really good job of showing that this region is very important. Then I realized the difficulty in talking about Europe is if it's a monolithic thing, the proximity, I think, is really important. As you mentioned, you know, the fact that things that happen in the Middle East bump into Europe very, very easily and can have positive or challenging effects. Are there specific countries that you think people look at where a bigger role for China is especially challenging for European interests?

Camille Lons: It's difficult to reply to a question because it actually depends on countries and depends on the interest you're talking about. I would say Egypt is an important one because of its location, because of the Suez Canal, and because it is one of the countries that has received a lot of Chinese investments and loans recently. So there is a bit of this concern of what that could lead to, how that could translate into leverage. And so Egypt would be an important one. But it depends. If you look at energy resources, you would be looking at Gulf states or when you look at countries where we have a bit of a stronger security partnership with and to whom we transfer some higher level of technologies and equipment in the military domain. So that could be the goal stage. The comedians as well actually when it comes to this question I was talking about, about the development and long term impacts on stability. And in some of these countries, the North African ones are important, but the Chinese footprint is actually quite limited. So the risk when it comes to it or to migrate countries is more limited. So yeah, it depends on what you what you expect, what you're looking at there is the question of the type of leverage China has in Iran and how, you know, in the context of the negotiations of the nuclear deal, actually now it's been relatively more of a positive impact because it is also with the support of China and, you know, potential Chinese investment that we manage also to convince Iran to do the deal in the first instance. And potentially the Chinese can play, again, this role in the endocrine negotiations. But again, what does that mean when a country like China has a quite important influence in a country like Iran that is quite isolated because of the current situation, that is also that could be also an important country to look at. So Turkey is an important one as well, of course, for the Europeans because of its status as a NATO power, because of its location. So that's also like a very and we see now with the crisis in Ukraine how Turkey is using its path to a membership as a point of pressure as well on European countries and playing a bit of an ambiguous role. So in the case of again escalation with China, Turkey would be like an interesting player to look at for the Europeans.

Jonathan Fulton: So that's perfect because other than Turkey, I think you inadvertently hit all the points that I was going to bring up myself because something I think a lot of people don't look at with China in the region, I think is, you know, this hierarchy of of interests that China has, you know, they use this this approach, the comprehensive strategic partnerships or or, you know, at the top level and then strategic partnership, the next level down and different countries get different designations. And you mentioned Algeria, Egypt, the Gulf states, which I'm taking a Saudi in the UAE and Iran. And those are the five countries that China is designated at that top level. And that's where, you know, its interests are the most multifaceted and deepest and where you see the most Chinese people and whether just in general doing the most stuff right, where they're doing more trade and more contracting. And I think the reason why each of those countries are important is because they all offer something extra, you know, like it's not just about trade, like when to be a conference, a strategic partner. The country has to be really important regionally as a political and economic actor, but also has to be considered important beyond the region. So, you know, a country like Oman, we're trying to do a lot of trade. Energy is important, but it's not really that consequential beyond the Gulf. So it could be seen as important internationally. But there's this plus this extra thing. So the UAE with its logistics and Saudi with the global Islamic global energy markets than Egypt with Suez, you know, all of these things give it an extra motivation to work more closely with those countries. So you can really see how China is engaging more closely with them. And Turkey, I always think it's interesting because there's that tension, right? Like, you know, Turkey's and NATO's and Turkey has got the difficulty with Xinjiang, you know, where the wiggers are Turkic people and Turkish leaders feel compelled to do something about it, but they can't do too much. And you know, so turkey, you can see how China's willing to go just almost to the edge, but there's always something stopping it. So I think that's how I. Kind of look at China in the region is looking at those countries and thinking that's where it has the most potential to, you know, be influential. And it could be influential in a meaningful way, a positive way it could align because like we've I've said and you've kind of reiterated this, that China's interests basically are for stability in a lot of ways. It's not right in the security realm at least. So do you think that this means that there are areas where China, you know, Europe could be trying to cooperate or at least coordinate policy in the region on specific issues where China might actually be seen as a helpful actor?

Camille Lons: Yeah, of course, I agree. Like, the thing is that the Europeans, they see China's influence with a bit of concern. But at the same time, they know that China is not going to go away. And it's very important. It can be very helpful and clearer. And when it comes to so, I mentioned the JCPOA, which is an obvious one. But in general, when it comes to development finance, the thing is that there are lots of projects where the Europeans don't have the capacity to do it, to finance all the projects. And Chinese companies have the ability actually to to to bid with quite cheap infrastructures and to allow some countries that wouldn't have access to these infrastructures otherwise. That's something that is definitely positive. On the question of renewable energy, the region is going to need a lot of investments to develop renewable energy power plants. Actually, when it comes to North Africa and the Gulf, the Europeans are very interested in also developing some of these power plants to provide renewable energy to Europe. So either when it comes to North Africa, they're looking at options to connect them to

the European grids, or when it comes to the Gulf, they have been looking at options for exporting hydrogen to Europe from Gulf countries. So there will be a need for a lot of development of these infrastructures. And it happens that China is the global leader when it comes to renewable energy technologies and equipment. And so it has already been involved in some of these big projects in the region. And so in that area, for example, there would be a need for Chinese investments in presence as well. There is also the fact that China is lending to a lot of these countries. The Europeans have been trying to engage with the Chinese on the debt restructuring, for example, with the Paris Club or or more generally, when it comes to development, they are trying to nudge China into aligning a bit more with some of the European standards. And it is something that is possible. I mean, there's been a bit of a debate in Europe on this, because some believe that this is a very naive approach and that it's actually helping China to get access to this region with the Europe the support of European money, because sometimes it's supported by European funding as well, without really making Beijing more cooperative on all these issues. But it's still something where there is a lot of space to, to, to try to engage more with China on these issues, because China is just not going anywhere on this. So you need to engage with that as well.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. You know, you made a great point. And I think one of the things that's missing in a lot of the ways people talk about these Chinese initiatives like The Belt and Road. Started. You know, China was sitting on something like \$3 trillion worth of foreign reserves, you know, like a decade ago. And around the same time, I think the Asian Development Bank issued this report saying Asia was in need of something like \$8 trillion worth of investment in infrastructure investment. And the ADB didn't have, you know, the capital to address that. The IMF and the World Bank didn't. And, you know, especially the World Bank and the IMF, there was a perception they weren't very good at that stuff anymore. And then you look at China and how it transformed itself over the past 40 years. You know, how it did solve a lot of development issues. I think you're right there. There's definitely something, you know, some lessons to be learned there. And in this, I think there's probably a little room for further coordination. How you politically? I think the stuff gets very complicated. But I think, you know, in terms of what makes China an attractive partner. You know, it's stuff like that. I think when people in the Middle East, these underdeveloped countries that have been trying, you know, through Washington consensus prescriptions for decades, and then China comes in and says, look, we got this thing called the Belt Road. And, you know, here's a picture of, you know, picking a random city from 1975 and here it is today. Wouldn't you like to figure out how to do that? Right. So I agree. I think especially on the development index, the third story development front, this is an area where there should be a little more coordination or cooperation. I guess the last thing you know, it's I guess early September. Everybody's still wondering. I'm not wondering. I don't think it's going to happen. But people keep saying Xi Jinping is supposed to be about any day now. They've been saying this for weeks. I'm putting my money in December. I'm saying this publicly here. There's no way he's going to be here any time soon for my money. But I could be wrong. But a lot of this seems to be in reaction to President Biden's visit to Saudi last month. And, of course, the role of the US, I think, is the elephant in the room with all of this. Right. You know, there's always the speculation that the US is transitioning its role in the Middle East, is transitioning from this dominant one, has played since, you know, Desert Storm to a less, you

know, US-centered region, which I think is maybe overstated the way it's been described. But I think there's a lot of truth to it that the US is considering a different role for the region and its interests. Here are what they were 30 years ago. And I think there's a recognition that it has to be the right size where the Middle East is in its foreign policy. Obviously, the Indo-Pacific has been called the Priority Theater. Is this idea that the US may be being less dominant in the Middle East and from you mentioned earlier, use strategic autonomy and need to play a more independent role. Does this inform your thinking about the Middle East and how China features in it?

Camille Lons: I mean for first to reply to the point on the Xi Jinping being visit I hate making predictions but I'm a bit I'm quite skeptical about the reports that we're seeing he would visit sometime soon because really he's quite new to China right now with all of the issues happening internally right now is about the Congress. Exactly. So I may be missing something. And he actually tomorrow will announce that he is in Saudi visiting. I don't know. But I have the impression that actually the paper that's mentioned that I think said that it was a Saudi source. And I have the impression that the Saudis have a lot of interest in spreading these kinds of rumors. And that's a way of sort of sending messages to the US. That's the same when the Saudi source said that maybe the Saudi could be selling oil for us. I mean, again, I'm not saying it's what happened at all, but there is also an incentive from the Middle East side to inflate a little bit, that kind of rumors, because it's part of their own political system as well.

Jonathan Fulton: To interrupt here and jump in with a point when the \$400 billion Iran deal. Exactly. You know, was announced in The New York Times, you know, completely ignoring what Chinese, you know, development, lending or investment have been the, you know, trending for the past several years before that. But the same thing, you know, all of these stories came from a leak, you know, from an Iranian leak. Could it be that maybe somebody in Iran had something to gain from the story getting the kind of traction it got? I think you're right. You know, I think the Saudi story was maybe trying.

Camille Lons: To serve a purpose just because that would be Chinese experts or people who look really from China's perspective, they are all laughing with them when they know about choosing a visit to Saudi, like, why would you go to Saudi right now? But again, we'll see. The future will say, well.

Jonathan Fulton: There's supposed to be a summit in December, so he's not going to make two trips to Saudi within a couple of months. Right. That's why I say I think he'll be here in December.

Camille Lons: Well, we'll see. We can make some predictions and see who wins. But. But sure. No, I mean, to come back to your point, on to your question about US engagement in the region and what how the Europeans are looking at that, that's definitely encouraging the Europeans to try to strengthen the bits. There, where there is security or more like, I think, a more geopolitical approach to the region. But again, I mean, they're trying, especially when it comes to the US China rivalry. They are trying to use that as a kind of narrative. They can stop some Middle

Eastern countries saying, listen, we can also be a third option and you don't necessarily have to choose between the two. And so they always position themselves in that kind of third position. And I guess that's also if it's the spirit behind the recent EU strategy document that was released, although I think it's still a very timid document. And I think that overall, most European countries are not ready to really have a very strong geopolitical approach to the region. The only one that has been quite proactive recently was friends with the leadership of Macron. I think he was the only Western leader going to the Baghdad summit last year. He was very active in Lebanon when the issue was starting in Hariri. He was, I think he was , the first, I think, western leader also to start meeting again with Mohammed bin Salman last year and again being very active this year, inviting him to the UN.

Jonathan Fulton: So very active here in Abu Dhabi as well.

Camille Lons: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. So he's been trying to again defend the European or French, but he says it's European posture in the Middle East that is a bit distinct from the American one. But apart from France, I mean, most European countries are not ready to really increase their presence in Greece right now. They're completely absorbed by the Ukraine crisis. So Germany has always been quite reluctant to be like a strong geopolitical player. And right now it's starting to wake up but France is really absorbed by its eastern side. So I don't think that we're going to see major changes from the European side when it comes to really their application in the Middle East. But it's something that's in the making. And at least there is a growing thinking as well in terms of how the military is. I hear more in the discussions how they're tying the Middle East also to the Indo-Pacific, and they see that a lot of the issues are happening and it was the same for the Ukraine crisis. Things happening in other geopolitical theaters have ramifications or can be linked to other regions. And so today with the Ukraine crisis, we see that the fact that Gulf countries are not necessarily ready to step into it, to support the Western point of view on this issue, is having concrete repercussions on our interests. And so there is this thinking of trying to link the different regions between themselves and to link the Middle East a bit more with what's happening in the Indo-Pacific and what could be the repercussions for us as well.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think I think that's right. I think, you know, the geopolitical muscle has gotten a little flabby for a lot of countries over the past 20 or 30 years. But I think we've all come to the realization we have to start thinking a lot more about world politics and less about, you know, this globalization framework. We've used to know more about, you know, how geopolitics affects us. This has been really fun, very fascinating stuff. Before I sign off, is there anything that you're working on that you'd like to tell us about or anything that WWE has got in the pipelines? That's interesting.

Camille Lons: Absolutely. For those who are listening to the podcast and who are interested in China and what the Chinese are doing and the kind of reach it has, I really recommend you to check the Icis China Connect project that was just released. It's basically an online interactive tool that represents all Chinese connectivity related infrastructures and investments outside of China and up to 173 countries. It's very useful. It's very interactive. You can get information

about each of the projects. You can explore their evolution over the past two decades. You can also draw correlations between these projects and the recipient countries digital penetration, for example, software or sovereign debt stock or other governance measures. There will also, of course, essays and analysis that will be published on this website, too, to help make sense of that data. So I think it can be a very useful tool for anyone following China's global lending and investments in the infrastructure sector. And I invite you all to have a look and don't hesitate, of course, to reach out to us if you want more information about the project or about the data and the methodology. So the website is ChinaConnect.iss.org and we look forward to feedback on that as well.

Jonathan Fulton: Cool. I actually was playing with it a little bit today before we went on the show and it is a very fun map. We'll put a link to that in the page and also put a link to your excellent articles they've written over the years. There was a great one on the Digital Silk Road Initiative that you co authored with a bunch of people that was really, really good. There is one that you did for the CFR a couple years ago that I also thought was excellent and had some very good coauthors on that one.

Camille Lons: Exactly.

Jonathan Fulton: But yeah, we'll put links to all that stuff, so thanks so much for doing this. Great to see you. Say hi to Taiwan for me. I missed it to our audience. Thank you for joining us. Follow us on social media. Subscribe, review and write to us on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. See you next episode.

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