

Description

China has made significant inroads into much of the global south, a trend that does not always receive adequate attention in the West. China's image in those countries has deteriorated in recent years, and there appears to be an assumption that this is universal. However, polling data from Africa and the Middle East show that China's reputation in the developing world is in much better shape.

In today's podcast, we are joined by Dr. Lina Benabdallah. Dr. Lina Benabdallah is a Wake Forest University assistant professor of politics and international affairs. Her research interests include international relations theory, foreign policy, critical theories of power, past politics, and knowledge production and hegemony in South-South relations. Dr. Lina will provide an overview of China's influence in the Global South, as well as why China is viewed positively by African countries. She will also discuss how China gained positive impressions from Africans and how this affects the global stage.

Takeaways

Overview of China's influence on the Global South
The different perspective of China between Western and Global South countries
Africa's positive impressions of China
Position of Africans in the US-China conflict
China's influence in the productive dimension

Quotes

Positive impressions and perceptions of China in Africa come from these tangible projects, goods, and infrastructure that people can use to make their life easier - Dr. Lina

China is identifying itself as a member of the Global South family. This makes them more appealing to countries in the Global South, as well as a model for countries aspiring to be great nations. - Dr. Lina

Featured in this Episode

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<https://www.amazon.com/Shaping-Future-Power-Network-Building-China-Africa/dp/0472074547>

https://www.press.umich.edu/10194365/shaping_the_future_of_power

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China's Soft Power Advantage in Africa

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-12-23/chinas-soft-power-advantage-africa>

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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 at Zaid University at Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. On this episode, we'll be discussing the gains China has made in much of the Global South, a trend that doesn't always receive enough thorough analysis in the West. Perceptions of China in those countries have plummeted in recent years, and there seems to be an assumption that this is universal. Yet polling data from Africa and the Middle East indicates that China's reputation in the developing world is in much better shape. In a recent episode, Michael Robbins from The Arab Barometer walked us through a report that they published in August of this summer that emphasized positive views of China and the Arab world. And a 2021 report from the Afrobarometer also showed that Africans tend to have positive views of Chinese assistance and influence on the continent. So what is it that China is doing differently in the Global South, and why is it effective? I can't think of anyone better to talk with about this than my guest today, Dr. Lina Benabdallah. Lina is an assistant professor of politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University. Her research focuses on international relations theory, foreign policy, critical theories of power, politics of the past, knowledge production and hegemony, and South-South relations. She's the author of a fantastic book, which I have right here called *The Shaping the Future of Power, Knowledge, Production and Network Building in China, Africa Relations*. And we'll put a link to it on the show page so you can find it and read it and enjoy it as much as I have. She frequently contributes to a lot of great publications, as well as Africa As A Country where she is a contributing editor. Lina, welcome to the show.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Thank you so much for having me, Jonathan. It's a pleasure to be with you.

Jonathan Fulton: It's a pleasure to be with you, too. So, Lina, to get us started, can you give us a general overview of China's outreach to the Global South? Why is it so important for Beijing to make such significant inroads into what we used to call the Third World, but now we call the Global South?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah, so China's early days and early encounters with much of the global south goes back to the Bandung conference in 1955 when we have PRC delegates coming into close contact with delegates coming from Egypt, from Ghana, from Algeria, lots of African and Asian countries, lots of African countries that were not even independent. And during that Bandung conference, it became really evident for the PRC that there was an opportunity for China to take on this kind of stage of developing countries, countries in the global south, to sort of share the lessons from the CCP's own revolutionary times, from its own ideology about anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. And the relationship basically starts there, starts with these opportunities that the Bandung kind of created and opened up for Chinese delegates to get to know delegates from various countries in the global south and try to give China that kind of platform to really talk about its own experience and that history. Right, that moment of solidarity where we see the CCP get to know and try to kind of enter into that revolutionary kind of friendship. It stayed, right, it is rhetoric and it is a moment that is celebrated even today in political discourses between the Chinese president and African and Asian and other presidents and leaders from throughout the Global South. So it has always been important for China to orient itself toward the global south because it could exercise that kind of leadership role to show that China has something to share with the Global South. In the 1950s, it was these anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism lessons that the CCP was interested in building on and finding momentum for its own revolution outside of its borders and in the global south. And we see that as well even today with this idea of democratizing international relations by including, you know, China in the conversation and not just focusing on the Cold War kind of bipolar moment. And so the Global South has always been important for Chinese foreign policy orientation because it allows China to exercise that sort of leadership.

Jonathan Fulton: Sure. And when you talk about the democratization of international politics, I mean, this is something I think that also factors, right? Because, you know, you hear Chinese leaders often talking about this, that they want to see a more democratic global order. But I think the politics of it also play to China's advantage, too. When you look at, you know, democratic international institutions like the United Nations, where you've got a lot of countries, you know, that don't necessarily see things the same way that maybe the U.S. or the EU see things and they might vote with China on issues that are more important to them. And it gives a lot more weight, I think, in those kinds of forums.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah, that's correct. And you mentioned the UN. Of course, it is through the UN, right, that the block of 77 was able to kind of show its support back to China, right. So

this is something that Xi Jinping had brought up as recently as 2021--this idea that China, that the PRC owes a lot to the global south in terms of gaining United Nations recognition, as you know, the PRC being the official China, the official representation of China. And of course, with that came the United Nations Security Council. So the vote was tilted in the favor of the PRC precisely because of this group of countries that became independent. They gained their independence in the late sixties, you know, mid-sixties and late sixties. And a lot of that solidarity that was built around the Bandung conference translated itself and manifested itself into something like that vote and something that, you know, kind of is present even today in China's rhetoric with the global south, that sort of recognition of the support that China got from these countries that were supported by China during the Revolutionary Wars, as well. And so we see the manifestation of that solidarity even. And, talking about it even today is present.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. Well, so I know that typically every year when the Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, makes his first trip, you know, his first international trip, it's to Africa, right? And this is something that I think is the optics of it are pretty important, I think, for a lot of folks in the developing world to see this giant economic power, this political power that says our first trip of every year is going to be to Africa to show that this is an important set of relationships. I was doing some reading before the show, and I found this quote from Xi Jinping, a speech he gave in 2021 when he said, China will always be a member of the family of developing countries. We will continue to do our utmost in raising the representation and voice of developing nations in the global governance system. I've seen other quotes where, you know, Chinese leaders talk about themselves as the permanent representative of the developing world in a lot of international institutions. So it does seem to be more than just rhetoric. It seems to be something that's taken pretty seriously by Beijing.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah, I agree.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So I think one reason I want to talk to you about this is that you've got such a unique perspective, right? Because you are, you can see this from a lot of different angles. You're based in the U.S. So of course, you're hearing a lot of the narratives within the U.S. discourse, whether it's academic or political, what people are saying about China. But then with your background, with your academic focus, you see it from different vantage points as well. So just for our audience, how are our perceptions of China different in the global south, you know, whether it's at home and in North Africa or whether it's in the countries where you've done fieldwork in the past? And why is this important for audiences in the West to understand?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah. And that's a very important question. You had mentioned earlier Arabbarometer, there is a similar thing to that, which is the Afrobarometer, which is a survey that is conducted by a whole big research team that typically goes to survey Africans, I think in something close to 40 countries, 37, 38 countries across the African continent. And then the surveys ask a whole bunch of different questions about government, about institutions, about but also in the recent 2 to 3 iterations of the surveys, there have been questions about China. So the Afrobarometer has been asking about how Africans perceive China and how Africans perceive their country's engagement with China. And by and large, the perceptions of China in

Africa through Afrobarometer, our perceptions show that Africans are aware of their country's foreign partnerships and of their country's foreign partnerships. They are generally overwhelmingly supportive of the relations with China, the country's relations with China. And when we follow sort of the Afrobarometer questions and we try to understand what it is about China that Africans give such a positive perception of, then we find that there is a high appreciation of it. So there is an association between Chinese investments with palpable material sort of infrastructure that people can see in their immediate background. So it's not sort of a fungible kind of aid that goes to someone's bank account or some sort of relationship that favors the elite over the rest of the country or that feeds into those kind of divisions that already exist in societies. But people associate, for instance, having infrastructure that is in the form of highways or ports or airports or schools or hospitals, or apartment complexes. They see these things as ways and opportunities and infrastructure that actually benefit the general population. And so a lot more people see benefit in having those infrastructure projects built in their countries than they would the usual kind of fungible aid, kind of classic models. So in many ways, that's what people in lots of African countries when you talk about China's investments, those are the things that come to their mind. And I would say from my own research and my own travels and fieldwork, it is very much the same impression I get. So even when I was in Bamako doing fieldwork in 2019, it's really interesting when you talk about China, people can point to a bridge and say, that's the Chinese bridge. So it's you know, Bamako is a city that's divided by this big river, Niger. So we have both sides of the river. So you always are in traffic crossing from one side to the other. And so bridges are extremely important. I mean, it's the only way to get across to go to this side or the other side. And there are three bridges and one of them, the most recently built one, is a Chinese-built bridge. And immediately people can point to that and say, this is what we think. Or they point to the motorbikes and you get around in the city on motorbikes if you don't want to be stuck in traffic for hours. And a lot of those motorbikes are Chinese, they come, they're imported from China. And so people are able to point to these things and say, so this is, you know, having China be involved in the economy, this is what we can point to see that connection. And I think that a lot of what you know, a lot of the reason behind positive impressions and perceptions of China in Africa come from these tangible projects and goods and infrastructure that people can point to and say, it makes my life easier to be able to get onto this bridge and get across the city or get onto this motorbike or have this phone that I'm able to do my business on because of all the e-commerce and all the facilities that that that comes with that that people have these positive impressions because there is a very present alternative. There's a present kind of contribution that they can see in their daily lives. It's not out there. It's not just at the level of basically talking. Right. So China's presence in the continent is really present. And so these are the things that people can point to and say, yeah. I mean, but you also get obviously some more critical perceptions. Of course, people can speak about issues of competition with, you know, smaller businesses not being able to make it in front of giant kind of conglomerates of, of, of Chinese companies coming in. So all of those you get into the nuance of it. And of course, there are nuanced perceptions, but by and large, that positive perception comes from there being kind of this material presence of China in the daily lives of regular citizens.

Jonathan Fulton: But so this is interesting because, you know, a lot of different companies or countries can build bridges or, you know, build roads or these projects. Is this just a matter of a lot in Africa, specifically, a lot of those countries or companies just haven't engaged at the same level that China has or, you know, is there something beyond the tangible outcomes? Is there something about China that's unique? I think in an earlier episode, we spoke with Tin Hunan al-Khateeb who talked about, you know, growing up in Algeria and seeing just how China kind of transformed itself during her lifetime from a place where people tended to have kind of negative perceptions of it as a kind of a poor and backward country. And then suddenly it's this technological and economic giant and thinking you know, oh, like, how do we do this? How did they manage to navigate this development gap so quickly and efficiently when a lot of countries in the Global South have been trying to do this for decades and it just hasn't really been successful? Is it something that China does differently or better or more appealing, or is it just that China's who's there now?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: I mean, it is all of the above. I mean, when it comes to actual infrastructure projects, there's a huge deficit in the African continent. In the realm of infrastructure, there's a huge deficit. Even with all the hype around what China has been building and what Turkey has been building, what the UAE has been contributing. There is an absolute need. There's a very vast gap in terms of infrastructure building in the continent. And so I don't think that there is a big competition, really, as much as there is a huge gap in infrastructure building in the continent. And so it is not from that immediate sense that Chinese companies are doing essentially the work without having a huge competition. So there's not a whole lot that's there that can say these companies are building the same thing. And then why are Chinese companies more popular? It's actually not there at all, maybe in other aspects, but not in the immediate kind of presence of those infrastructure projects. And so actually, I was looking at Brookings put out a report a couple of years ago, but I was just looking at the share of China's investment in infrastructure projects. I think in terms of funding, about almost 20% of infrastructure projects that are built on the continent are funded by China. And then and then sort of the next biggest one is individual governments. And then you have from 20%, then you have individual countries like the US which are like 5%. And then the IMF, World Bank, all of these things are in the single digit, tiny, tiny percentages. And then you sort of you get the idea here that it's just, by and large, you kind of, you know, it's more present in that way. But to the point that you brought up, you know, aside from these infrastructure projects at the level of the elites at least, right, so then we can talk about this relationship at the level of the regular sort of, you know, citizen, what is present to what's immediately present to them, what's available to them. But we can also talk about this at the level of sort of the elites and the leadership and that and in that sense, of course, then you can see that the conversation moves maybe a little bit beyond kind of the material things that are available to more or less the aspiration. And so this aspiration of China's success story in terms of its development and in terms of basically how it was able to achieve historically huge levels of development in a very short amount of time is very much in the back of people's minds and leaders and elites when they are thinking about their own development, their own countries trajectories and thinking about what is, what's an aspiration, what's a model to aspire to. And I think that this is something that has also worked for China. Earlier you mentioned how Xi Jinping talks about China being a member of the Global

South family, in the family of developing countries. And that is in itself really exercising that attraction on, you know, leaders and elites from the Global South because they can still today associate and it resonates, right. So people can identify with China because they don't think of it as okay it's already jumped over to the other side. It's a developing country. It's a big, great power. And all of a sudden that experience is not available as something that can be done or is doable in the same way it would be if people thought of China as part of this family of developing countries. And so in a way that language used is a practice, as you said, precisely because it keeps this momentum going around. If China was able to achieve this level of development in 30, 40 years, of course, coming from a similar background in the developing world, then that provides that aspiration that people, elites, and leaders can also achieve or can have the aspiration to achieve those levels of development as well. It's not inaccessible. It's not impossible to do. There is definitely that aspect that's also important in the development of Africa, at least in terms of looking at China as very viable. And also just an enviable real success story on that, that China was able to do this in this amount of time coming from all the challenges that the PRC came out of in 1949, which are very similar challenges to a lot of African countries coming out of their own struggles for independence.

Jonathan Fulton: There's so much in there that that's really struck me. You know, when I was doing my bachelor's degree in the mid-nineties, I was focused mostly on African politics. And I had this vision of myself working on African politics. And then I took a turn and ended up in Taiwan by accident, I guess, and became like an Asia guy. And now I'm Middle East. But I remember one of the things in that period was, oh, you know, the African Department at my university was not expanding in the mid-nineties because after the Cold War it was you could see the direction things were going in. A lot of Western institutions, I think, saw that it wasn't maybe as useful a piece of real estate as it was during the Cold War. And you could see, I think politically maybe that that became a bigger issue where especially the U.S. didn't engage in Africa in the way it did. And you can see a point when China starts becoming a much bigger actor there. And so I think just to your point about showing up, you know, I remember a couple of years ago, I think, when John Bolton was the national security adviser and he went to I can't remember which country, it was in East Africa. And he gave a speech. And I think he mentioned China upwards of 30 times in the speech. And it was pretty clear to the audience that the focus wasn't on what the U.S. can do with African countries. That was mostly like Africa has to work with us, you know, in this kind of geostrategic struggle with China. So I think your point of just showing up and delivering material or tangible outcomes is something that's really important. And I think that transfers across, you know, a lot of different countries and regions. One of the things I keep seeing studying a lot of Belt and Road projects over the years is there has been a lot of caution from Western governments saying, you know, to developing countries, you shouldn't engage with China on this stuff. You know, there's the debt trap narrative, which, of course, was very, very prominent for a long time. There was talk of environmental degradation or lax labor standards or any number of things. A lot of reasons for countries to not engage with China. But I think what we saw was what you described where well, what's the alternative? Are you going to come in with something that we need, that you can deliver on time that we can afford, that is going to meet the same criteria? And often the answer is no, how does it resonate, do you think, when you know this narrative of you shouldn't let China into this, whether it's

critical infrastructure or whether it's just, you know, standard infrastructure that countries need for, you know, economic, you know, a bridge.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah, I mean, you set it up very nicely in that even in the speech that you mentioned by Bolton, it is not that Africans are naive to the possible challenges and disadvantages of their relationships with X, Y, and Z partners. And oftentimes you will well, you will see Africans actually being very open and to listening, to engaging in a conversation. The issue with a speech like the one that Bolton made was that it kind of showed Africans, it just gave the impression that the US did not at all see Africans as a partner in this relationship. It just was a platform for theater, which is the language used in the military. But it's it is, you know, not just you know, it's the theatrics of it actually is very interesting is that the African continent is then at this point just used as a theater to counter China as much as it was used as a theater to counter the USSR, as much as it will be a theater to counter X threat in the future, and so on and so forth. So when put in this longer context of interaction with the US, then Africans are a little bit skeptical because they are not able to figure out what is it exactly right that the US is interested in doing differently in Africa than China is. At the end of the day, then it becomes the case where Africa is kind of used in this really US-China competition and there is no genuine interest in actually figuring out what works for Africans or not. So if this conversation was to say, well, let's set up a way, for instance, for a government to have a third party doing a risk analysis of X, Y, or Z project coming in so that you have the full picture of what are the potentials on debt issues, on financial survivability, on environmental sustainability. I'm pretty sure people would listen to something like that. So if it was framed as sort of a building the capacity of Africans to negotiate better in terms of figuring out what the project might look like or might bring in terms of risks. That was not what was presented. And what was presented is just kind of a very patronizing discourse that treats Africans as less than able to make decisions on their own, and that there is a threat coming from China that they just needed to be protected from. And that is really what Foreign Minister Pandor of South Africa, just this last time when Secretary Blinken was visiting South Africa and held a meeting and press conference with her, she did mention this to say to Secretary Blinken that Africans are not willing to take sides in somebody else's conflict. If the US has issues with China, it should be able to resolve its issues with China outside of its relationship with Africans, and that Africans today are more interested in cooperation and they are more than willing to cooperate with Chinese companies and with U.S. companies and take sort of, the better bid, the better, you know, kind of offer. And she kind of pushed a bit against this rhetoric and this growing kind of discourse, trying to pull Africa into this US-China kind of competition and trying to influence Africans. And she mentioned precisely the burden, right, of being talked at and talked down at as Africans when leaders she didn't mention the US in fact, she said that that's that she isn't she doesn't she's not talking about Blinken as having done that. But she said she had said in meetings with several Western leaders where she is asked basically to stay away and to choose between and to basically move away from dealing with China. And she had refused that. She said we actually are sovereign countries. And if you are going to talk about partnerships, you have to recognize our sovereignty first and our ability and responsibility to deal with our partners in the way we see fit our own constituents and our own people, and so on and so forth. And so we see this pushback. We see this at least awareness right on the African side that's trying to say, please leave us out of this, these

tensions that the US is experiencing with China precisely because we've already been through that and the Cold War where you have these two giant powers and then somewhat playing these proxy conflicts on the African continent and then the African is on the losing end of this relationship. So. So yeah. So I think we are seeing that kind of pushback coming from African leaders and that's a good thing.

Jonathan Fulton: So I take your point. I hear the same kind of thing. Like so there was an article we're recording this in early November. There was an article yesterday in the Wall Street Journal about Xi Jinping's expected trip to Saudi Arabia in December. And I think the way that we often hear about this trip is how Saudi is trying to get things from China, and trying to get things from the U.S, and this is the hedging strategy that they're using for this tension. And I was actually quoted in the article, and my point was, I don't think that's I think it's kind of a superficial way of looking at it because I don't think they're trying to take advantage of the situation. I think that you know, the Saudis have a deep interest in the U.S. and they have a deep interest with China, and they're trying to pursue both of those things concurrently. It doesn't have to be one or the other. This binary, I think, doesn't register with a lot of countries' leaders who aren't thinking about things as pieces on a chessboard. They're thinking, how can we address our own domestic or economic, or political pressures? And when I think of the points you're making about the narrative, I don't think it's always necessarily from a patronizing tone like I know it often is, but I don't think it always is. I think one thing that I really enjoy and I've heard you on it as well is, We Used to Be the China-Africa podcast, I think now it's the China Global Self podcast, which is a really good show. And what I get when I listen to that is I hear a lot of really brilliant African people who know China really well, and I think that's one of the things that folks maybe should listen to more is just the voices from Country X or Region X, because I think what's the assumption is it isn't really you don't know what you're doing. The assumption is there's not always a lot of knowledge production about China coming out of a lot of countries. I mean, I see this in the Middle East where, you know, here in the UAE, I don't know a lot of people who have studied Chinese, I don't know a lot of people who've been studying Chinese history of language or culture. So I think what we see is a place like the U.S. where there's an amazing community of China scholars and China watchers who are maybe sometimes a little heavy-handedly saying, you know, learn from our experience. And it doesn't work very well sometimes. But, you know, I don't think it's always necessarily meant to be, you know, kind of finger-wagging, even though it probably often sounds like that.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah. No, I agree with you. And just. Yeah, I agree. And just to add to that, oftentimes the point you make about the voice and listening to voices from the country is important is extremely it's on point precisely because if you think about, for instance, you take the example of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Institutes in the US have been in the last few years there's this trend of basically closing down and canceling the contracts or at least trying to basically curb a bit the influence of Confucius Institutes on curriculum design and all hiring and all kinds of other issues. If one does not understand that Confucius Institutes in the US are basically built on a very different premise than Confucius Institutes in African countries. One could assume that the experience that universities in the US have experienced with Confucius Institutes is directly translatable to the experiences of universities in Africa with their Confucius

Institutes. And then what you come with from the US and this experience as the lesson learned, will sound patronizing because it just doesn't even match the reality. And so what? And so that gap that you mentioned, right, that gap is that you mentioned should be mediated through knowing more about how Africans experience China in their own context and not in the context of, let's say, universities across the US or across European institutions and how they experience Confucius Institutes. So that's just one example to kind of go back to the point you made about the importance of listening and learning from Africans about their own experiences so that we can figure out which lessons make more sense. And then if the lessons don't make sense, then that's where the patronizing experience becomes real.

Jonathan Fulton: Sure. Yeah, good point. I was smiling as you were talking about the Confucius Institutes because I've seen a lot of them around the Middle East. And, you know, you'll hear obviously when they're in, say, the UK or in the U.S. or in, you know, European countries, you do hear these narratives of their serving, you know, very overt political agendas. What I've seen here couldn't be further from the truth. I mean, they seem almost cute in comparison. They're just, you know, two or three teachers trying to, you know, wrestle students into a classroom so they can learn something about China. And it's really I think, you know, your point that it's different in different places is important because here it doesn't look like that. I did a lot of research for this show. I was reading a whole lot of your stuff. And I went, I found an article you published in Foreign Affairs in 2019 called "China's Soft Power Advantage of Africa," which will also link to the show page. It's a good article, but I think you made a good point. We keep hearing maybe less so in the past couple of years. You published in 2019 when, you know, the BRI narrative still dominated the big ports and the billion-dollar MOUs that we kept seeing every time a Chinese official would visit a country. We've seen less of that as there's been less travel and there's been more focus on smaller projects. But I think the point you made still holds. You wrote about the less visible elements of Beijing's diplomacy and how this is important in a lot of countries. And I thought that was something that also really should be described as impactful. But what are these less visible, visible elements of what China is doing in countries beyond the big, splashy headlines?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah. Yeah. I mean I think in, in the book as well as in that piece, the, my, my, my experience looking at China-Africa relations and China's involvement in Africa and also for the, for the edited volume chapter that I wrote for you, Jonathan, I make the same argument that we that there is this aspect of human capital investments, that this aspect of trying to build social capital in Africa through exchanges, through delegation visits and seminars and summit meetings with Africans that focuses on having those networks, having that social capital focuses on expanding that human capital. And that's exactly what I mean by this sort of invisible infrastructure. So aside and beyond looking at what buildings show up after signing deals and so on and so forth with China and Chinese companies, it's also important to understand that China's foreign policy in Africa is also interested in that human capital aspect, in the sense of, you know, trying to expand the party-to-party relations, for example. So the CCP has increasingly been inviting members of different political parties from the African continent to China. And so they would travel to China, they would sit usually there's a mix, a combination of sort of really doing seminars and substantial kind of conversations with tours and cities and

touring different facilities and sort of the combination of those two lead to. And of course, over time when you have these routine visits and exchanges, what it does, it, it kind of brings people closer, right? So these are elites that are part of the CCP on the Chinese side and part of the political parties of different political parties on the African side. Then it gets political party elites from Africa a first-hand experience of how the CCP is managing all this development. How is the CCP able to keep its people happy, and how is the CCP managing media-to-people relations? Or how is it managing civil society organizations? How is it managing its own relations between civil-military ties and so on and so forth? And so you have these opportunities for elites from different African countries to learn firsthand how the CCP has been able to achieve this perceived success that it has achieved over the last 30 to 40 years. And so I think that that aspect, this element of the network, this element of social capital, and building this momentum of bringing delegations from various African countries to China for these experiences is extremely important. And so that's one aspect looking at it from that party elites. And of course, now in Africa, we have this new party leadership school that opened in Tanzania that is a joint party school that six political parties on the African continent joined together. And it's very much modeled after the CCP leadership party leadership schools and basically on the very first kind of inaugurated kind of class, then you see participants write a letter Xi Jinping to basically thank the CCP for providing the model. And, and so then actually, you know, he wrote that so he, he got the message and he wrote back to them. And so you see these connections, in the ANC in South Africa as well. It has all kinds of vocals. The ANC is the political party. The African National Congress in South Africa has made several, you know, speeches. And of course, there's an hour outside of Johannesburg as well, a party leadership school that's modeled after the CCP. And so we see these connections, you know, that they're not as visible as, let's say, a port that China built or an airport or a highway. But they are connections. They are an infrastructure that is going to sustain China-Africa relations for generations to come because this is essentially what today is kind of a lower or middle-ranked political officer in a political party over time is going to be, you know, high-ranking officers. These are people who are going to elites who are going to take on positions in their government. Or in that piece that you mentioned, I also talk about, for instance, journalists from African countries who receive these training sessions. So opportunities to go to China for training and as well when they come back, they have, you know, the power to kind of portray and write and disseminate discourses and narratives and stories and basically rhetoric around China and China's investments in Africa. So it is very important I really do think that especially now when we are seeing investments in terms of BRI investments and in terms of hard kind of financial investments, kind of depend a little bit in China for correlations. We are still seeing these kinds of connections in terms of social capital. They are even more important now than they were before because they need to do the work of sustaining China's interests and China's foreign policy interests in the continent in the long run.

Jonathan Fulton: That's one of the things about the Belt and Road that I thought was really interesting because it really was quite vaguely defined in a lot of people's minds. But they did lay out these five cooperation priorities and they didn't make a hierarchy of it. They said, you know, we want to focus on these five baskets of things. And it was, of course, the infrastructure and the financial integration, the trade and policy coordination with people-to-people bonds, I

think, is the way they put it, were the last of the five that were listed. And when, you know, you start to see things like less big funding for huge projects or you saw COVID, you know, making the trade less viable, you start to see these other things, whether it was, you know, educational or sharing health information or, you know, a lot of these things start to step up. And you could say there's still this kind of cooperation that's linking these countries to China in a pretty meaningful way. I know before COVID, when and, you know, when I used to be able to go to China pretty easily, I was always amazed to see just this broad range of international students going to all these different Chinese universities. And it was, I thought, a really, really smart move, you know, to meet people from Egypt, people from Yemen, people from Nigeria, people from wherever that were going and getting a master's degree in China and learning Chinese. And they go back home and obviously they're going to have pretty favorable stories to tell.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah. At the very least, they have the language skills to be able to act as a direct kind of bridge between their own government and the Chinese government in terms of translating in terms of. So you don't have to go through to understand what's going on in China when you have people who have been trained and have lived in China and have that sort of deep knowledge of the history, of the culture, of the economics, of the politics and so on and so forth.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, it's smart. I mean, you see it wherever you go. You'll meet people that went to university in the US and they go back home and they've got their alumni associations and they're very, you know, they've got great nostalgia and they've got great memories. And I think it's pretty smart on China's part. Another piece of your writing that I was reading recently was again, with your very, very, very good book. I'm really enjoying it. I haven't finished yet, but I promise I will. But one of the things you wrote about that I thought was interesting was you wrote about the errors of conventional wisdom that a lot of folks when they think about China's engagement with you, write about in Africa, but I think it applies in other places. You know that China's power is measured in material terms. You know, you know, it's military power or, you know, things like this rather than relational or productive dimensions. And a lot of what you've just discussed were these relational dimensions, I think of China's ability to enhance those political ties or personal ties. But just can you go into this a little more like what do you mean by these relational, productive dimensions? Because I think it gives us a pretty useful way of thinking about how China's influence in the global south, you know, whether it's in Africa or the Middle East or Latin America, whatever it is, it's much more interesting than I think we tend to look at it.

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Yeah. I think the premise for that argument is exactly as you describe. I mean, it's rather simple. It just says that when we are examining China's influence in Africa, for example, and we try to understand what does China's influence look like in the continent, or where is China's influence in the continent? The biggest or the strongest influence? What I am proposing to do there is instead of looking at where China built the most number of the largest number of ports, highways, and airports, I say actually at the end of the day, then, you know, a port, even if it's built by China, is it's an airport is built by a Chinese company. It's true that immediately people will remember that, but over time, they may not necessarily associate that

airport with something that China has built. It just becomes part of the background. It's just an airport. You just go and you fly into the airport and come in. But what I'm trying to say here is if we really wanted to measure the influence and try to understand that influence, we need to look at these investments that are really long-term. And I think the investments are long-term, as opposed to an airport, which, let's say in ten years, people will forget that it was built in China. If you have a political party membership that has annual training, annual and more than annual, even more, frequent than that, close connections and close ties and visits and exchanges and seminars and learning from the CCP and from Chinese counterparts. In the long term, that's not going to go anywhere. You're not going to forget that in ten years or 15 or 20 or longer. So I think that what I'm trying to do there is to shift the way we understand the influence and the way we calculate or we measure influence by saying instead of really focusing on these immediately accessible, visibly ready projects, we need to also really figure out a way to calculate in our understanding of influence precisely what you are, what you were mentioning earlier about students. So if you know a generation for instance, were a couple of different statistics. I mean, I know, for instance, in Juba, the University of South Sudan, and the vast majority actually of people trained who work now at the university are people who got their PhDs from universities across China because of the scholarships that Chinese embassy has been the first kind of, you know, saw an opportunity. It's a new country. It's a country that needs to have its elite and capacity building invested in. And so you have Chinese, you know, universities inviting PhDs. And so it's not essentially not going anywhere in that way. The influence and I also saw a piece of there was a publication in Quartz, Africa, in December 2021 where the authors say that in the year 2021, there were more Ghanaians with a Ph.D. who graduated from Chinese universities in that year than there were Ghanaians with PhDs that graduated from Ghanaian universities. And so that is quite impressive at that scale of figuring out the kind of these long-term investments. So these are long-term investments of people who get their degrees from China. They are people who live in China. They identify they have friends, they have stories, and they have connections. And they just have a way of looking at whatever it is. It's if it's engineering or journalism or whatever it is that they've got their degree that's mediated through their experience in China. And that's going to stay there. It's not going to go anywhere. So these people, these elites, young people who come back with their degrees, they take jobs. They get promoted through the ranks. And the more we have these connections over time and over the scale that they are happening, I think that to me, that's how we should measure China's influence in a way, looking at it from the perspective of network theory. So it's not about how big the port is or the airport is, it's actually how many layers, how dense that network is in terms of figuring out, you know, the numbers of delegations, the programs that send students to universities, the journalists that go for training, the kind of party-to-party connections. And then on top of that, of course, and then also, I'm happy to add the other sense of influence. But what I'm trying to get at is really these relations that Chinese foreign policy is building in the continent through investments and capacity building and human capital and student exchange programs and scholarships and so on and so forth really are what I call shaping the future of power. It's really looking at the future. It's looking at the long-term investment rather than focusing on, well, on the airport or on the highway and so on and so forth, only without looking at this other aspect.

Jonathan Fulton: That's great. So the way you're describing it, you know, there's again, there's a lot that resonates when I think of my field of research, which is, you know, the Middle East, what China's doing in this region. And I hear I keep hearing a lot of conversations from folks in extra-regional powers who will say, you know, how can we kind of meet the China challenge? How can we know, how can we maybe not balance but, you know, step into this place where China seems to be making tremendous gains? And what you're describing is kind of what I see missing for a lot of countries here is just like just articulate what the region or the continent or the country mean to your country or your government and then come up with a policy to say, let's pursue this in a meaningful, you know, serious way. That's why I keep thinking when people say, like, how can we, you know, engage like in the Middle East. And I think, well, what do you want from the Middle East? What does the Middle East mean to your country? And when you can answer that question, then you can start to make not a policy that is against China but is a policy that helps your country in that country, of that region and kind of play to your own strengths rather than tries to hobble somebody else. That's what I'm thinking when I'm listening to you talking about Africa. But I'm just wondering what advice, you know, a lot of the people who listen to this are in the D.C. area. There are a lot of folks who are thinking about this professionally. Any advice you have for people when you're thinking about how other countries could engage more meaningfully in Africa or in the global south?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: And I think maybe I want to reiterate two points that you made in our conversation. The first one is listening to African voices. What does that mean? It means really being open to coming out of this conversation from understanding, first of all, the African perspective or the Ghanaian perspective or the Nigerian perspective or the Ethiopian perspective, and really listening and trying to understand what are these people's needs, what are they looking for, how do they see their position in terms of their relations with the world and tying that number to, which is very closely related. And it's something that you just mentioned now, but it is really figuring out, what is, for instance, a private company in the US? What is its competitive advantage in Africa? What can it do in Africa that it can do best? Rather than, let's say China's really doing great at X and then the company wants to outdo China at X. I think that that's not the best way to look at it because already, as I mentioned earlier, there are huge deficits in the continent. Just within infrastructure, there's a huge gap that there's room for all kinds of different investments and come in at this from only the narrow-angle of outdoing China and outperforming and competing and out kind of, that's not necessarily always the best thing because Chinese companies, especially in terms of infrastructure, have been doing this for decades. They have really entered the market. They made themselves really smart about moving within the market and figuring out their own competitive advantage. I think that, for instance, for the US private sector, it would be important to figure out what is that fees that these companies can add, and the same thing for the US government. So it would be the same question that the US can offer Africans that it can do the best job at doing it, rather than trying to compete directly, head-to-head with China or with Russia or with Turkey or with UAE on things that these countries do best. So in many ways and of course, you know, Judy Moore and Aubrey Shubert and others have been, you know, right time and time and time again about what they see as the private sector competitive. What do they see? What are these investments and projects and sectors that they see the US can contribute to or what US companies can

contribute the best in Africa. But for me is just in general the attitude it's and the strategy should just be focusing on what can US companies offer to the table that the US companies can do the best job at, rather than just trying to ideologically stubbornly kind of compete in sectors that may or may not work out?

Jonathan Fulton: Very useful. Okay. Well, Lina, thanks so much for this. We're going to put links to all this, but your website is linabenabdallah.com where listeners can find links to all of your articles, your book, and I recommend everybody check it out. And check out Lina's Twitter feed, which is @L and a dollar. We're always posting excellent threads, stuff I can use in my syllabi and stuff. So it was very helpful for me. Anything you're working on these days that you'd like to share or promote, or anything you've read lately that you think would be useful for our listeners?

Dr. Lina Benabdallah: Um, I've been, I've been consumed with writing a bit on China's mediation strategy and diplomacy in Africa. Actually, I just finished turning in a chapter in an edited volume that's going to look at China's mediation, diplomacy, and so forth. For my part, I looked mostly at Mali, but the idea was to look at the Sahel in general. And it's interesting, Jonathan, you and I should talk about this more because in the piece I both found and argued that China's mediation policy in the Sahel is closer to China-Middle East than it is to China-Horn of Africa or China's remaining thinking of the continent. So it's a little bit I argue that it's a bit closer to the Middle East. So at some point, I'd love to talk to you about this, but it's, you know, it's a work in progress. That's what I've been interested in. It should be coming out. I don't know when, but it's a Stimson-led project that Junsen has been kind of working on for the last few months. And I'd be more than happy to keep in touch.

Jonathan Fulton: That sounds like another episode. Okay. Well, Lina, thanks so much for this. Really enjoyed it. You know, I could keep asking you questions all night, but, you know, I think we've got to wrap up here. So thanks so much to our audience. Thanks for joining us again, folks on social media subscribe, review, and rate us on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts. And I will see you next month. Thank you.

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