

Description

China's rise to power has led to discussions about whether the country will support or try to change the current international system. China has both supported and been dissatisfied with certain aspects of the system, demonstrating a preference for a Chinese-led global order via the Belt and Road Initiative and Global Development and Security Initiatives. To better understand the actions of China, we invited Nadege Rolland, a Distinguished Fellow, China Studies, at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), an American private think-tank based in Seattle and Washington, D.C. Nadege will share an overview of China's initiatives, the perspective of other countries towards China's rise in the global economy, and whether China will continue to support the existing global order or try to change it.

Takeaways

China's opposing view against the international order
China's Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative
China's narrative to the world as a rising power in the geopolitical stage
China's control and strategy in maintaining power locally and globally

Quotes

China has been very worried and concerned about the Global order itself because it really is antithetical to the principles under which the Chinese regime is being built. - Nadege

This BRI is really a way to support a vision for a new world order that is China-centric. - Nadege

Where does the success of China come from exactly? And what constitutes this success? You will see that there is a lot to it, that it is more about the liberal elements that have allowed for China's success now. - Nadege

Featured in this Episode

Jonathan Fulton

Nonresident Senior Fellow for Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council. Assistant Professor of Political Science at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi

Profile: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/expert/jonathan-fulton/>

LinkedIn: <https://ae.linkedin.com/in/jonathan-fulton-2627414b>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/jonathandfulton>

Nadège Rolland

Distinguished Fellow, China Studies
The National Bureau of Asian Research

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nad%C3%A8ge-rolland-00778085/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rollandnadege>

Chapters

00:00 Introduction

02:16 Global order

07:38 China's view against the order

15:07 Overview of GDI and GSI

24:50 China's solution to world's fundamental problems

39:46 China's political values

48:08 The resilience and adaptability of one-party rule in China

This podcast was produced by Heartcast Media.

<https://www.heartcastmedia.com>

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 growing power and influence has inspired a lot of work that concentrates on what happens to the international system when a rising power approaches the level of the country or countries that dominate. Will the rising power be satisfied with how the political and economic system works and support it? Or will it be dissatisfied and try to change the rules and norms that shape how the system works? With China. It's safe to say that on some issues they've been somewhat satisfied and on others, they're clearly less so. And in recent years, we've seen a lot of Chinese initiatives that show us Beijing's preferences for global order, things like the Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, the Health Silk Road, and more recently, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative. To help us understand what all these initiatives mean. I can't think of a better guest than Nadege Rolland. Nadege Rolland is a senior fellow for political and security affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research, where she focuses on China's foreign and defense policy and the changes in global dynamics resulting from the rise of China. She's the author of the first great book on the BRI China's Eurasian Century Political and Strategic Implications The Belt and Road Initiative, as well as several excellent reports for the NBR the devs. Thanks so much for joining us.

Nadege Rolland: Hey Jonathan, thanks for having me.

Jonathan Fulton: Oh, of course. Of course. I'm glad you could you could make the time for us. So the does you've written a lot of great work over the past few years, but for the purposes of today's show, I want to focus on one that you published nearly three years ago for NPR. China's Vision for a New World Order. Before we get into that, the idea of global order can be pretty abstract for some some people who are political scientist or professional political analyst. So what are we talking about when we talk about global order?

Nadege Rolland: Right. So I, I have skipped that class when I was in college and university. So I'm going to and I'm not a political scientist by training. You know, I've spent most of my career in government. So I'm approaching this from a very sort of pragmatic and simple minded way to me. One way to explain it or the way I define it is the world order is what gives shape and structure to the way states interact with one another. It's sort of simple, but it's in any form of community. You have some rules of engagement and some some things that are going on, and it's the same at the international level between states. And since the end of the Cold War, after the collective collapse of the Soviet Union, we have been living in what the U.S. has tried to build as a as an international order, as a liberal international order. They have tried to to create this system that would comprise mostly liberal democracies, that would interact according to a certain sets of rules and norms, including, for example, free trade, respect for human rights, the resolution of disputes through through negotiation or peaceful resolution of disputes, elected governments, rule of law, international law. So set a set of, of, of principles, rules and norms that underpin this broader system. That's that's what we're living in right now. Or partially we're living in right now. Because there are some countries that don't that don't fit this description.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. A lot in my neighborhood here in the Middle East. I think that's a really good description because you covered a lot of the main points that I would talk about with my students when we're talking about this stuff. You know how. Kind of the social aspect of it, right? How how countries have to find ways to to work together. And the rules and norms, I think, are really important. Right. And of course, these get set typically by countries that have the most influence. And I think you're right. Since the end of the Cold War, my entire adult life, it's been you know, the U.S. has been the center of this order. And I think a lot of countries have benefited from that. Right. I mean, you can see countries like North Korea or Iran or Iraq, obviously, that that have chafed under this or been dissatisfied or felt excluded. But China, I think, has largely been the beneficiary of a lot of this.

Nadege Rolland: It has been. But the.

Jonathan Fulton: Benefits.

Nadege Rolland: Yeah, absolutely. I think it has been. But at the same time, China has from the start been very worried and concerned about the order itself, because it really is antithetical to to the principles under on which the regime, the Chinese Communist Party regime, is being built. So, you know, I would even argue that for the government in Beijing, the liberal order is actually a matter of of of existential threat, because it promotes the idea of individual freedom,

respect from human rights and looking at the world in free flows and exchanges. And that's the opposite of what the party state wants for itself inside of China, but also on the global stage. You know, it wants to retain a certain degree of control over economic forces, over its society, over its security, over its Internet, etc.. So we have very different visions of what the world should look like for themselves, but also for for the entire architecture that we're talking about.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think that's that's fair. And I think, you know, there have been a couple of guests at different points since we've been doing the show over the past few months. One was Don Murphy. I don't know if you've seen Don wrote a really good book on China's approach to the global south, and she makes a distinction of the rules based order and the liberal international order. And when we talk about the rules based, I think that's something the PRC says, Hey, we like that. If there's rules, we can figure out how to use these to our advantage. We can go into the United Nations and rally support for things that matter to us and get to X number of countries to agree in. This works in our favor and I think they like that. They like, you know, how you can, you know, resolve trade issues or whatever. But the liberal international part of it, I think, is where they get really uncomfortable. And I think they're not alone in this. I think a lot of countries don't really like the liberal bit in how it works.

Nadege Rolland: Yes, I think that's a very good way of of explaining it. You know, the rules can be they don't need to be necessarily liberal rules. I mean, in theory, you can have an architecture, you could have institutions and organizations, but then the rules and norms and values that underpin those could not necessarily be liberal ones as the ones that I have just enumerated. You could have rules that are mostly statist, mercantilist power based rather than, you know, openness, transparency, effort to limit corruptions and things like that. And I think this is this is where the moment that we're living in is so important, because we realize that instead of socializing, I think that's the term that political scientists have used socializing countries like Russia and China by incorporating them into that liberal system. What what has happened is that they those authoritarian countries have rejected and have been resilience against change, against transformation, against socialization. So in other words, I think the belief was if they're if we're incorporating them into this system, they will see how beneficial it is to them. And they will want to become more like us. They will want to transform their economies. They will want to transform their political system. They will want to transform their approach to governance. And none of this has happened because and especially in the case of China, which is the country that I'm focusing on, because none of these areas are. Areas in which the party, the Chinese Communist Party, wants to be transformed. They have their own vision of what matters to them, of what is important for their interests. And liberalization is not one of. One of those important things to them.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, that's that's wholly fair. I think we often project what we would like to see on the party. But even, you know when I think back to. The good old days, you know, the Hu Jintao or the Jiang Zemin years when it kind of looked like the trajectory was taking them in an arc that was more compatible with, I think, what some countries would have preferred from from the Western perspective. You could see that as. I know that the party has clamped down a lot over the past decade or even over the past 12 years or so to clamp down on this. But you can see a lot of pressure from below. And I think that's why the Xi Jinping years have been so so strident, is that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the party, that there was a lot of pressure from people in China to start to move in a more open direction. I just so I kind of see what they've been doing as a response to that.

Nadege Rolland: I think it's I would dated back much, much earlier than I mean, Xi Jinping. It's it's both a lot of change, but mostly an acceleration or or an intensification of trends that were very visible for people who were, you know, trying to understand it for what it was and not by projecting things onto a reality that was not exactly what we wanted, but. You know, I. Not sure I want to go into too much detail because I'm not sure where they were going to lose your audience for that. But, you know, in the Jiang Zemin era, hee hee, he had this idea of the three represents, which was a way to integrate a class like classes that are not the ones that usually Marxist regimes think about, including interpreters and business people inside of the party. And that was to me, that was the first step into trying to adjust with the changes that were starting to appear in China, while at the same time keeping control over the people and production forces and social forces. And in the Hu Jintao period, there's a I mean, going back to 2008, 2009, there's a lot of clamp down happening in China already. I mean, talk about Tibetans and people in Xinjiang and, you know, remember those periods and an effort also to to to to to control the society a bit more. 2003 also in the Hu Jintao period, this idea of China's peaceful rise. So these are all indications of transformations that are already happening much, much earlier on than 2013.

Jonathan Fulton: Yes. I was working on a paper earlier this year and I had to go back and read, reread a lot of that peaceful rise work. And it just seems so quaint. You know, it seems like a totally different era. But also.

Nadege Rolland: Yes, but no. You know, it's also sorry, sorry I'm interrupting, but I think there's a lot of re for repurposing of things. It's like the party doesn't seem to ever discard anything. It's it it adds up layers and layers. It builds on layers of the past and it repurposes some of those older concepts. Or sometimes the concepts change, but the, the, the substance of what's there is the same. And I feel like, you know, you in your introduction, you were talking about the Global Security Initiative, the global development initiatives. And when you look at it, okay, it's another term, it's another formulation, it's another brand. But if you start to look at what has

appeared as a substance, what makes the substance of it, it's just a repurposing of things that have appeared earlier. It's it's usually a an evolution on the same themes, really.

Jonathan Fulton: That's actually a great segue because I wanted to ask about these two things. I always notice a pretty significant gap between China announcing these big initiatives and, you know, the Western media or Western governments, you know, catching up on it. And with the Global Development Initiative, when this was announced, I didn't see really much in The New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian. I don't think people are really paying a whole lot of attention. And then the Global Security Initiative was, what, this April, I think, yes. 22, they announced it. And still I haven't seen a lot of really substantive analysis of it. It seems that a lot of people are not really paying attention. So could you give us a brief overview of these two initiatives and what they're about and why they're important?

Nadege Rolland: So it's not really surprising that people haven't really paid attention because it's it's it's exactly what you're saying. You know, the Beijing will launch these things and then sometimes they will not define it very clearly for a broader audience. So the thing is that Xi Jinping announced them six months apart, starting with the Global Development Initiative developing with him. Yes, in September 2021 and then the Security Initiative in April 2022. But then it's it sounds more like it's. It's it's something that is out there, but we don't know the exact content of of it. It's a bit. Both of them are a little bit nebulous. Yeah. And even in, in the official announcement where it's very poor so far in details. So the only thing that we can say or that I can personally say about both of them now, it's that first of all, it's a sort of formalization of China's global intentions that global initiatives. So, you know, for a while, I think many observers were still thinking that China had only limited regional ambitions, limited to its own region, to East Asia and both the Belt and Road Initiative. I mean, the Belt and Road Initiative to me was really the that critical point in time where it was clear that China was not envisioning itself solely as a regional East Asian power, but as a global one. But since then, you know, there there's been a recurrent official pronouncement positioning China at the center stage of the international arena, taking even the lead of the reform of global governance. So and now global security and global development. So the ambition is really not just regional. That's that's just a very clear marker of Beijing's and global ambitions. But then it's also about burnishing its its credentials on on the global stage. So I would be cautious about discarding both initiatives as empty slogans. You know, I've heard so much about Bri being an empty slogan. It's just the label on things that were happening before, and it turned out not to be the case. I think I would really caution everyone, everyone who thinks about these things just like empty announcements. It's just that the way the party state operates and that was really obvious with the Belt and Road, there are these announcements and then it's sort of an internal collective effort to try to figure out how this is going to be concretely fulfilled, implemented, the exact directions that this is going to take. So. It's a different way of strategy strategizing. It doesn't mean that it's less efficient or that it's it's stupid and empty. I think it's just a different way of of doing things. So I think more details might emerge in the next few months for Belt and Road

between the official announcement by Xi Jinping in late 2013 and the publication of a white paper in March 2015. There's a whole year and a half where details were really scarce about what it was exactly people were. And that's why people were starting to say it doesn't amount to much.

Jonathan Fulton: And yet I was, as you're describing this, I was thinking a lot of things. And one was I was listening to comedians recently about how they how they work. And one guy says he'll often write the punchline to a joke and then figure out how to get there. And that's kind of what I think about when I think about BRI, because you write like in 2013, there were these big announcements and then in 2015, the white paper came out and I remember reading something where basically every ministry official all throughout 2014 had to, you know, make the thing right, like, okay, this is what they want. Now, how are we going to do it?

Nadege Rolland: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Jonathan Fulton: One of the things that struck me when you're describing it is just just this like I keep hearing from kind of bro skeptics who will say, like, you know, this this thing isn't working. The death trap narrative has has undone it. I think its vagueness is its strengths, because it can be anything, you know, looking in the region here when when a lot of the development projects weren't happening or trade started to decrease because of COVID, then the people the people side gets amped up, right. That that people to people prior corporation priority becomes the focus and they can say we're still doing Belt Road, we're doing it through, you know, sharing information and, you know.

Nadege Rolland: And Health Corporation, right? Yeah. Yeah.

Jonathan Fulton: And and I think that's true of this. So, like, I just pulled up. I've been working on a report on the GSI guy, and that's taking forever because for reasons you're describing, it's it's a very kind of nebulous, you know, for the guy, there's six priorities staying committed to development, people centered approach benefits for all innovation driven development, harmony between men and nature results oriented actions. That's the idea at this point. Yeah. What does that mean, right?

Nadege Rolland: Yeah, it can be anything. It's very lofty. It's very lofty. It's always it's always like that, you know? It's very general, the direction. It's just giving a sense of direction. And then you're right, it's that. I like that parallel with the comedian, although in this case I don't think it's any matter for that. So funny for a laugh. Yeah. Yeah. But but yes, it's, it's it's how it, how it works and people in the ministries, but also like the the academic world and, and experts are all called into that collective effort in trying to find ways to make this happen. The thing with BRE is that because it was it was lofty, it also had from the beginning, it had those very specific, both specific and broad pillars about it. You know, people just latched on to this idea that this was about infrastructure, build infrastructure.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah.

Nadege Rolland: Just the infrastructure. And then forgot about the other components of policy coordination, trade and financial integration and people to people. But it's it's really a full a full program of how you create. An order like a system that will prevail and create those new interactions between countries and between countries and China. So this belt and road is really a way to support a vision for a new world order that is China centric. So from from concrete to more abstract.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So I just about two months ago, I was talking with somebody and they said, Yeah. Belt and Road. You know, I ask somebody about, you know, these projects that are linking ports around the Arabian Peninsula. And this person was quite dismissive and saying, you know, the Belt and Road is a toxic brand. Nobody talks about it anymore. It's over. And, you know, I wasn't quite so cavalier about dismissing it. And then we saw just so we're recording this December 21st, you know, two weeks ago, Xi Jinping was in Saudi. And when you look at all the joint communiques, the Belt and Road was front and center of all of it. You know, when they're talking to the Saudis about things are going to cooperate on, they're saying, how are we going to merge the Saudi Vision 2030 with the Belt and Road Initiative? And, you know, so that clearly isn't going away. This is still the I think, the main pillar of a lot of what they're trying to do. And I agree, I think there's a normative component to this that doesn't get thought about enough. And you can see that with the GSI and the guy as well like it. They they seem very vague or very general. But when they talk about replacing the just going back to what you're saying earlier about how these norms and values are embedded in order. And I think what China's creating is, is an order that embeds different values and different norms, and that's attractive to a lot of countries in the Global South that never really got the good end of the liberal international order. Right. Yeah.

Nadege Rolland: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's also what China is frankly playing on because if you know, this offer that China wants to share with the rest of the world, the China solution is an alternative. And the way China presents it to the world is. Something that. Something that will provide solution for others and that could provide solutions in places where the liberal solutions have not done. And and this is the essence of. So there are two, two sources of dissatisfaction for for Beijing with the current way, the current order or the current way that the world is organized. The first one is that. Currently it doesn't give enough space for China because it gives they feel like their material power has grown and the balance of power is shifting towards Asia and China in particular. And yet the order as it's organized, still gives too much weight to Western countries, and that's and specifically to the U.S. but that so it doesn't reflect this change in the in the balance of power. And the second one is that they they criticize it by saying it's an it's it's unreasonable said the first part is unfair. It's it's not a fair share given to emerging countries and specifically to China. And the second one, it's unreasonable because it doesn't provide it doesn't solve the world's most fundamental problems of peace and prosperity. And actually, they're inverted in saying that the liberal principles and values and promotion of democratic norms are actually bringing chaos rather than peace. And so that the the way China has developed, evolved, both in terms of stability and economic growth, is a viable alternative. And so they reject the idea of universal values and the fundamental individual rights. From which everything else in the liberal order stems from liberal means liberty. I mean, really core of it is the individual freedom from that too. If you the individual is free, he is free to, uh, to go to Enterprise, to go and get informed, to go and vote for his government and decide who is going to represent him, etc.. So everything falls into place. So it's a, it's a very different way of thinking about how to organize those interaction and the world itself. And because of China's own path and and model, they think that it's not only a viable solution for other countries, but a superior model. And so most of the narrative that China is now projecting in the emerging and developing world is you you should try this one. We could be an inspiration for you because the other solutions haven't worked that well for you.

Jonathan Fulton: So as an inspiration, I've actually that's been another recurring theme on this show, talking to people from the Middle East who know about China and say, we don't see it the same way. You know, the Europeans or the Americans see it. We don't see it as a threat. We see it as an inspiration. How did you go from being a poor, underdeveloped country to this, you know, economic power? Like, we want to do this, too, because IMF solutions or World Bank solutions haven't helped. And when you're describing this, I just thinking your report there was a quote from Fu ing who was the the chairperson of the National Party Congress Foreign Affairs Committee. And she gave a speech in London five or six years ago. And she's saying, you know, the rules based bit we like, you know, we're part of that. We're in the U.S. We we we want to continue with that. But she actually criticized the liberal order, saying, you know, this perpetuates Western dominance. It's not able to solve the world's most serious problems. It often exacerbates the world's most serious problems. And, you know, then saying, yeah, why not try what we do? It might be, you know, an alternative for you, right?

Nadege Rolland: Right. But what what the what this narrative hides or obfuscates is that China arrived to this point precisely because it let it reformed in open and it let those, you know, market forces and select liberalization take hold. So you cannot say, you know, look at us, we have achieved all this because of our exceptional solution that is outside of the liberal order, because it's not entirely true. It actually allowed for some elements of liberalization to, you know, it's that it's the image that things are being used. We need to open the window even though there are going to be flies coming in. We need to have this openness so that we can attract capital investment, technology sharing, etc., which China did. So China's success is not just based on the on the parties specific solutions for itself. It actually has incorporated some of those liberal norms and values. And it's because of that that it's been beneficial to to China's development. So if if you just say, look at us, we are controlling our economy, you're were controlling the market, forces were controlling our society. We're controlling the information space and were successful. I think this is not a it's it's been a line publicity in France we say in first publicity and publicity muscle there you just you're just not telling the exact truth about what you're selling. Right. So I think in you know, for for countries around where you are based in the Middle East, this is something you need to start understanding better. Where does the success of China come from exactly and what constitutes this success? And then you can see that there's there's a lot to it, that it's more about actually the liberal elements of it that has allowed for China's success now.

Jonathan Fulton: Those are all great points. And I think, you know, I was in. Chiro a few months ago. And when people were talking about China, it was they used to love superlatives, but they didn't really know much about China. You know, they would talk about how it respects our sovereignty. And it's the world's greatest economic power and rising political and security power. But when you ask the follow up questions, you know, okay, if it's a great military power, what is it doing in the region security wise? And, you know, we don't know. You know, like a lot of it is just the assumption right there, hearing reading the headlines and just projecting this 100 foot giant is how they see it. It was interesting that when they were talking about China, there seemed it seemed very transactional. They liked the way China was seen to be standing up for the Global South, that it was that it was, you know, using this new narrative of how they would like to see the world work. But there was nothing beyond that appreciation. There was nothing in material terms like what are they actually doing to to work on it? And like you say, they need to know more about it because there are very few people in the region speak Chinese. Very few people are studying Chinese politics, culture. It's really a blank slate for a lot of people, and I think it doesn't really have a lot of natural allies or partners. You know, because I think a lot of countries maybe admire what's done economically. They admire the transformation. But, you know, if you said, would you rather do you want to live in, you know, under the party that's going to lock everybody down for a couple of years and then open up and everybody gets covered? Is that what you want? And a lot of people don't find that especially attractive.

Nadege Rolland: Yeah, it's that and it's also, you know, from from an outsider's perspective, it's what is it that China has to offer for for yourself? You know what? How would that serve your own interests, national interests, whether you are in Iraq or in Algeria? You know, what is it that you can get out of it? And I think here, too, there's a very fundamental difference in between the way Beijing and maybe Washington see their relationship with those countries. I mean, at the principal and theoretical level, I think the the the approach from Beijing is we're basically favoring a very elitist approach without much concern for the people. So it's it's about creating. Creating a lot of of. Yeah. Creating more depth and strength of government to government political elites. And when I say political elites, it's not just the politicians, but also the business communities, people who have the power. Whereas I think the American approach, again, in theory, it's not necessarily always the case and the reality and how it translates. But I think there's still a an effort to engage with civil societies, with, you know, it's more a people based approach. I mean, even democracy is about the people first. So for countries in in the Middle East, I think this is also what you need to think about. Is it something that will benefit a certain portion of the government elites or is it something that's going to benefit the people and the entire country? Because if China wants to come and say, okay, do like us. And we're going to invest in this project. And by the way, we don't really going. We're not going to control whatever you're doing with the money. And if 10% of it is going to your own pocket or if you're taking people away from their land or if you don't respect labor laws, I mean, you know, sometimes I feel like in in discussions I've had with people from emerging and developing countries, they're always like, yeah, but development is what we need. Human rights is secondary. What you mean? What does human right do when you don't have anything to eat or, you know, to warm yourself or something like that? But in reality, I think that human rights are really fundamental, because if you don't let the people be entrepreneurialism and decide and have a say in what is best for them, then none of this is going to happen to them because the money and the food and the heat are going to go to the elites only because they're corrupt. And anti-corruption is is also a matter of transparency, which is also a matter of rule of law, which is attached to, again, liberal ideas and norms. So if you look at it this way, there's a lot of things that if you look deeper into what the China solution versus the the liberal solution brings, there's a lot of food for thought, I think.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. The Middle East. As a political scientist, this is really interesting laboratory, you know, because you can look at, you know, this is really the nexus of where this stuff comes together. You know, they've got these long standing relationships with the U.S., but these are kind of elite bargains, you know, government to government bargains. It's mostly based on interests. There's quite a big gap between the publics. And then you look at. But but, you know, as you described, the U.S. does have these ideals that it would like to think it tries to uphold in the region, although, you know, experience doesn't alter the realities is.

Nadege Rolland: Yeah. Yeah.

Jonathan Fulton: It is very different. But China comes in and says, yeah, that stuff isn't what we're about. We're like, you described we're about building states, you know, because a strong state can solve these problems. And I think when you hear them going back to the GDI or the GSI, when Chinese analysts or politicians talk about Middle Eastern security issues, they always say they always frame it as it's about development. If you can build functioning economies, if the state has capacity, if people have jobs, they're not going to be inspired to join, you know, a terrorist group or a political Islamist group that tries to overthrow the government. And, you know, all that stuff goes away and you get, you know, a functioning government with a good economy and a happy middle class. And you don't need an army in this case because you've got stability. And that's kind of the way they frame it. My issue with that is, okay, well, then why isn't that working in Xinjiang or in Tibet? You know, it's all matter of just providing economic stability and then people won't fight against the state. Right?

Nadege Rolland: Yes. I think what really is missing from this equation is that human beings are fundamentally idealists. I mean, look at what's going on in Iran. I think, you know, here you are in a system. I mean, I'm again, I'm just observing it from the surface. So please forgive me if I'm not qualifying anything in a proper way. But this is a system that is what you're talking about. It's a strong state that has control over its population and has had it for a long time. And yet you see this movement. I've heard an Iranian woman recently describing it so well. It just touched me to the core, which was they. The population and the women in Iran have been prevented from having access to freedom for their entire life since they were born. They were not taught what democracy and liberal values were, and yet they felt them inside of them very deeply. And they're basically exerting their fundamental, universal human right to say no to tyranny and to demand freedom. So I think and I don't know if these women really think about having a job or or or, you know, having food on the table at this moment. What matters more to them is their ability to be free and to, to, to. And that's an ideal rather than a very material based interest. And I think the what is out from the from the equation in what you describe from this conversation that people have in the region when they talk with China, is this ideational element, you know, you need to have and and this is a it's sort of the undercurrent for us in the in the human being psyche, really. Now if you had to choose between living in. I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe people would answer and say, well, I'd rather be, you know, in the stable, not censored a country where I don't need to make any decisions for myself. And I'm just following what the government wants. As long as I can have access to this or that, maybe. I don't know. It's it's hard to say.

Jonathan Fulton: I don't know either. I mean, it's it's easy to look around the region and see extreme examples where you could say, you know, if you look at. You know, Syria or Iraq. And you could see these polar extremes where, you know, they had a functioning state and people lived in fear and they didn't have any freedom, but they had a degree of stability or security. And

then the state didn't work and they lived in utter chaos. And, you know, given those extremes, it's pretty easy to say, you know, obviously I'd rather not live in chaos. But most of the region is not in those extremes. Right. So it becomes a much more abstract question, I think. I was thinking of somebody I was talking to in the region, and this person was in a country that had swung from a to a more authoritarian turn in over the past decade. And he said. When he sees his government talking with China, it makes him nervous because when you spend a lot of time with authoritarians, you start to normalize authoritarianism and all of those, you know, values that you might want to see that give you a little more freedom or a little more opportunity, just start getting shredded a little faster.

Nadege Rolland: It's interesting, but it's I don't think it's restricted to countries in the region. Right now, the Foreign Minister of Australia is I think she is in China or she is going to China soon. And there's there's a lot of controversy about this trip because people in the street, some people in Australia are saying she's legitimizing a dictatorial and genocidal regime. You know what? What is the urgency of going there and visit? And isn't that opposite to what Australia stands for in term in terms of values? So I think this is it's exactly what you're saying. I think as China is getting more and more out of the closet and what its real nature is and what it stands for and what it rejects and has more power to pursue those objectives without pretending otherwise or pretending to be some other form of government or or or shaping or our perceptions in a way that makes us look elsewhere. Is are we going to be even democracies? Are they going to be able to continue to interact with Beijing in the same way they used to? And that's something that European countries are also. I think people are willing to go back very quickly to Beijing because Beijing is is seemingly giving some. Signals that it wants to be more amendable or more charming, less wolf warrior ish or less aggressive. And people want to go back because they still feel like, you know, there's some business to be done and there's some dialogs to be held then. And then the question really becomes whether this is this is something that helps Beijing hone its own legitimacy.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, well, I think you you hit right to the heart of the problem because, you know, a lot of the problems that we face globally requires China. Right. Like when you're describing Europeans going to Beijing, my first thought is Russia and Ukraine, right? Obviously, they want China to do something to help.

Nadege Rolland: Good luck with that.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, bizarre to see it happening. But but I think on most. Big issues. We see China as an actor. We have to try to engage. And which one are we going to get? I think to their credit, I hope they realize in Beijing that the past couple of years this very strident,

aggressive tone is really not done them any favors. So whether it's wolf or you're in sheep's clothing and they try to, you know, just mask, you know, don't say the quiet part out loud anymore and then just try to rebuild some of those relationships. But I know I'm from Canada and we've had a. Pretty big shift in how we've seen China just over the past ten years. And I think the same can be said of the Australians, the British, you know, most liberal democracies have had a pretty hard time navigating that relationship. I guess if anything gives me hope, it's just that people in China aren't especially happy either. And you know, the government like we saw with the Zero-Covid policy going, maybe the government will have to be responsive if the party wants to stay in power. Not that I think it will change that. You know, the underlying nature of what the party does are wants. But I think more than anything, they're about self-preservation, right?

Nadege Rolland: Yes. I think this really the main theme that can be learned and traced back several decades is the resilience of the party in and its aims, and the first one being its own survival and ability to perpetuate its own power. And then there is some little flexibility about how to do exactly that and the ingredients that you can use to go to to achieve this objective so you can be pursuing economic growth and giving more material comfort to your population. You can use ideology. You can use repression. A little bit of the three more of one less of the two. And this is these are the ingredients that they have used to to sustain their power, just like any other authoritarian country would. But but what really matters is this the sustainability of the one party rule. And then it's this perpetual re invention or ability to, as I was saying before, to build on the layers of the past without rejecting any of them. Like Xi Jinping has not rejected the Maoist heritage and he has not rejected fully Dong's heritage and not even Jiang's. And whose heritage? His building on top of it. And he's putting his own sauce to to to create that bond between those very disparate elements and adding some Chinese civilization and traditional culture on top of it, and nationalism as a spice to to to link everything together and to serve that dish to to the population. So this is this is something the ability to adjust and adapt and reinvent itself is is really interesting and having the party state works.

Jonathan Fulton: That nationalism space. I think they've used a little too much. It's kind of ruining the flavor of everything else.

Nadege Rolland: Yeah. But on the other hand, from I think from the party's perspective, it has. It's a way to replace the, the like the Marxist, the pure Marxist ideology. China is not a revolutionary power anymore. They are. It's this very idiosyncratic composition of elements. They're they're bits of that. But it's not fully that. There are lots of references that are pseudo Confucian, but they're not a Confucian state either. There's lots of references to make this almost mythical. Histories of of of China's glorious past. This this need to this strive to to get back their place in the world erased a century of humiliation. So it's a it's a domestic narrative

that has a lot of repercussions and implications for China's external behavior. But it's a way also to both bring this coalition or glue internally, domestically. And it's a way for the party to create that sense of perpetual crisis, which it needs to create this sense of unity. You know, there's always something going on. There's some always some attack from elsewhere. We need to stay together, be united in order to confront and survive and and emerge as as the winners of this situation. And if it's not this crisis, if, again, another crisis, you know, throughout the the history of the last few decades, you know, for a while it was Japan and then it became the U.S. and next that and now it was it was COVID next. And and it's India at some times. And sometimes it's Taiwan. I mean, there's always something going on that is both imagined and created to to provide this ability to have the country knit together, because there's no other ideal that the party can provide to its people. The slowing down of its economy has started to erode the ability of the party to say, we're going to provide you more with material comfort as compared with the Maoist era when we were just trying to create this revolutionary state. Now we're going to we're going to give you more economy comfort, material comfort. And now that it's eroding and what what is left, really? Where you need to to serve something to your people. Now, when you were a radical to a dictatorship. You still need to have this ideational underpinning of what motivates you to move forward. And nationalism is is the space and it's the driver.

Jonathan Fulton: There are so many directions. I love to go in from this, but I've already taken way too much of your time that I've really enjoyed this. Thanks so much. This have been really, really helpful. I think people in the in our audience will take a lot from it because. Well, because it's really useful. I think your work is we're going to put on the show page links to your your NBR page and all of the reports in the books and things. What are you working on now? Is there anything that you have coming up soon that will build on this?

Nadege Rolland: Oh, thank you for asking. I'm starting in January, a new and new project that's going to try to understand China's I call it China's strategic space. So it's a bit I'm using the party's own recipes. I'm keeping it broad. I'm not sure of the direction of it yet. And it will be up to some colleagues of mine to see what we're putting into into it. But looking at the region, the the way that China wants to reorganize its own periphery and and its own region, I think that's the main idea behind the project. So maybe in a year from now, I'll be able to tell you more about the the answers to that question.

Jonathan Fulton: I can't wait. I'm such a huge fan. I have been for years. I really appreciate you taking the time. Thank you. And look forward to whatever you put out next to your audience for the invitation. Oh, of course you are on the wish wish list from day one. So for all of you folks listening, thanks for joining us. Follow us on social media. Subscribe, review and write us on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts and we'll see you next month.

