

Welcome back to the China-MENA Podcast! In today's episode, titled "Middle East Instability: A Chinese Perspective to the Latest Flashpoint," our host Jonathan Fulton and Shanghai-based guest expert Chuchu Zhang explore China's evolving response to the ongoing instability in the Middle East—including the attacks in the Red Sea and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—and how they test US hegemony in the region. Join us to gain valuable insights into Chinese leaders' perspectives on a US-Centered Middle East and the current Chinese dilemma in the region.

Takeaways

- Chinese View of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict
- Testing US Hegemony in the Middle East
- Overlapping Interests with the United States
- Middle Eastern Actors' Diversification of Partnerships
- Concerns About Regional Stability and Conflict

Quotes

"The reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran reminds us that sectarian confrontation in the region is not inevitable, transcending the need to highlight China's greatness."- Chuchu Zhang

"There are common interests promoting peace, but it's not a comprehensive solution to all problems. Yet, there is another perspective on promoting peace through development."

Featured in the Episode

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Transcript:

Jonathan Fulton:

Welcome Welcome to the China Media Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayed University In Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. In December 2022, Chinese president Xi Jinping made a highly publicized visit to Saudi Arabia, where 3 summits were held and 1,000,000,000 dollars of deals and MOUs were signed. In the immediate aftermath, there was tremendous momentum in China relations. Iranian president Raisi visited Beijing shortly after. There was the Saudi Iran rapprochement announced in Beijing. Palestinian president Abbas visited, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu announced that he would visit later in the year as well, although that fell through for obvious reasons. As a result of all this high profile symmetry and diplomacy, there was a widespread assumption that China was emerging as a major actor in the region.

Jonathan Fulton:

After the Hamas attack and subsequent war in Gaza, however, China's been less visibly active, confounding expectations of those who expected to see more leadership from Beijing. It's safe to say a lot of people are trying to make sense of what to expect in China and the Middle Our guest today will shed some light on this. I'm happy to be joined by Zheng Chuchu. Chuchu is an associate professor of international relations at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University in Shanghai, where she's also deputy director of the Center For Middle Eastern Studies. She received her PhD from the University of Cambridge, and her research focuses on Middle Eastern politics, Sino Middle Eastern relations, and regional

governance. She is among the most impressive scholars working on the Middle East and China today, and is someone I always learn a lot from whenever I get the chance to talk with her. Tutu, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could join us.

Chuchu Zhang:

Thank you so much for having me.

Jonathan Fulton:

Oh, of course. It's really great you're doing this. So just to start, I think, you know, in this one in previous programs, we've talked a lot about what I or other guests who are not in China, and how we interpret China's interest in the Middle East. Of course, you're in the center of a lot of these conversations at your, your position at Fudan. So how would you define China's interest in the Middle East? What do you think are the primary considerations of Chinese decision makers when they're thinking and making decisions about the region?

Chuchu Zhang:

Okay. First of all, I'm happy to be here, and also I have always been same with Jonathan. So first of all, regarding China's interest in the Middle East, as we all know, the Middle East is an essential energy supplier for China, especially right now in the context of the Russian Ukraine war, so everybody realizes the importance of fossil fuels. And I would say that the Middle East does not only have oil and gas, but the region also has vast deserts and abundant sunlight. So it's actively developing hydrogen and solar power. So I would say that in the future, it also has the potential to become the center for new energy, and that is also in the interest of China, of course. And apart from energy, the Middle East is also a big market for China. So, like, China is proud of, like, being the manufacturer of the world.

Chuchu Zhang:

So for example, the region imports lots of manufactured products from China, and also it is a promising, infrastructure market in China. And, apart from, like, energy and markets, I would say that the Middle East is also, a key partner for China's overseas cooperation, under the Belt and Road initiatives. Well, when it comes to the Belt and Road initiatives, a lot of people are saying that the Belt and Road Initiative establishes connectivity between developing countries. While it is true, but, actually, China also wants to work with rich countries. Right? I mean, the purpose is not just to work with developing countries, but, if you look at the region of the Middle East, for instance, actually, there are a number of capital intensive countries, which situate somewhere with the developed and developing countries, particularly the GCC countries. So it means that, when China Corp operates with them. It does not need to invest in everything. And China and the GCC countries can co invest in many, Projects.

Chuchu Zhang:

And also right now, China both invites these countries to invest in Chinese projects within China, and also invites them to cooperate with China and co invest with us, in projects along the Belt and Road initiatives in other countries, which is called third party Operation. And last, I would say that there is a saying that China has laid an increasing emphasis on the Middle East.

But I would say that this saying is not the whole picture. While, yes, it is true that China has paid attention to the region, I don't see it as something surprising. Actually, I would say that the whole world is looking at the region. It's not just about China. And the reason is very simple, because, you know, the international influence of the Middle East is on the rise. So for instance, in the past, there is a saying, the destiny of the Middle East is not decided in the region, but in Washington or in London.

Chuchu Zhang:

But right now, you will find that, not only that many negotiations about regional affairs are actually taking place in Doha or Abu Dhabi or Dubai, but also many, thorny issues, hot issues outside the region cannot be discussed without participation of Middle Eastern actors. An example that is very obvious is the Afghanistan issue. And we have to keep in mind that the Middle East is at the intersection of the east and the west. So, lots of dialogues between the east and west coast and middle region. So I think it's not just China, but many powers also show great interest in the region.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's a great overview. I think it's telling that you started mostly with economic issues And then later tagged on the geopolitical. Do you think that's an indication of how people think of China's position that it is first and foremost an economic actor and that strategic or geopolitical issues come after?

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. So it's like, so traditionally, it's like, China's relations with the Middle East, starts from energy and economic sectors. But later, like, but later well, first of all, of course, since China's economic interest increases, then it has to Look into the geopolitical issues, especially, like, after the Arab Spring, the geopolitical landscape is becoming more complicated in the region. But at the same time, I would say that the region itself is becoming important. So you will see that it's not just We we often say that's okay. The Middle East is looking east, but actually at the same time, the east is also looking at the Middle East. So it's not just about China.

Jonathan Fulton:

Right. Okay. And and and I agree with everything you've just said. I've been kind of making a similar argument for a while, but I think what A lot of people started to pay attention in a much more focused way when, you know, you could see in the past couple of years, there have been a lot of really high profile events. And I think, president Xi's visit to Riyadh on December 22 was probably the biggest because, you know, a few months before that, you had president Joe Biden visit Saudi, and that visit wasn't seen as particularly successful. I think on either side, it looked like the relationship wasn't particularly strong at that moment. And then a few months later when president Xi arrives and they roll up the purple carpet and there's, you know, all of these leaders from the region who arrive. And I think whether it's accurate or not, a lot of people do a contrast and saw, you know, China's kind of this ascendancy in and in a bigger role.

Jonathan Fulton:

But like you say, this is something that's been building for quite a while. In terms of diplomatic and strategic affairs, do you think it's accurate that people believe that China is becoming much more prominent and that it's willing to use this political capital it's been developing through trade and investment and BRI infrastructure contracts. Is that going to result in China developing a more strategic or diplomatic presence in the region?

Chuchu Zhang:

So indeed, I think China is actually playing a bigger role in the region. And as China's interests in the Middle East are increasing as there are lots of investments and construction projects going on. China has to engage more in regional affairs, and only in this way can China protect its own personnel safety and commercial interests. Otherwise, if you just invest in the region, but you do nothing like engaging in any political affairs there, then it's very likely that when a risk you can't really, you know, protect your own interest. But, actually, I think it is important to note that China itself cannot just, do whatever it wants. So on the one hand, if the Middle Eastern actors do not accept that China takes a bigger role, then China cannot do it. So the context is that today, the Middle Eastern states, they also pursue strategic autonomy, and also they are trying to diversify their diplomatic partners and also, like, the regional actors collectively looking east and launch, various missions like, Saudi vision 2030, etcetera. And this kind of thing provides an opportunity for China to expand its influence in the region.

Chuchu Zhang:

So I think it's a two way interaction rather than a unilateral action by China. And also on the other hand, also, I would say that the United States and the other established powers in the region are not, like, entirely opposed to China playing a more prominent role in the region. And if we look at, for instance, the coverage of the nice days or, like, the western media. Actually, there are lots of coverages, and reports, which encourages China's participation in Middle Eastern issues like combating piracy, like counterterrorism, like climate change issues, also, like, Iran's nuclear agreement and also, like, providing assistance to the region, which helps to address the shortage of local public goods. Right? And also, I think there are lots of overlapping interests between Washington and Beijing in the Middle East. While China does not want war and instability in the region, I would say so does the United States and European Union. So there are a lot of common interests. But right now, I would say that there is a big challenge.

Chuchu Zhang:

While there are lots of challenges, one of the most important challenges for China, when it takes a bigger role in the region, is that whatever it does, it is very likely to encounter criticism. So for instance, when China takes little action, in a regional conflict, people are saying, see, China is trying to avoid its responsibilities as a big power. But on the other hand, when China takes a lot of actions, then people are saying again, well, you are a threat. You are to feel the vacuum in the region. Is that it that you're, like, very ambitious and want to challenge United States hegemony or whatever. So it's like, China is always at the defending size. And, also, like, I would say when the other's expectations of China's role is very vague. Then it's very hard for China to perform its role at the moment.

Jonathan Fulton:

There's a lot of interesting points you brought up, but I was thinking while you're talking. Obviously, you're a Middle East specialist. So when you're thinking about the region, you're bringing your own preferences and your own experiences into it. But just generally, how does the Middle East feature among people in China? You know, maybe people who think about international relations, people who are thinking about foreign policy issues. Is the Middle East a prominent region in the minds of a lot of Chinese people? Is this something that they think about as an important thing for China?

Chuchu Zhang:

Right now, I would say yes. So first of all, like, these days, especially after October 7th last year, so right now, I think it's a whole issue. Because, like, so both Chinese and international news have a big focus on the region. So everybody is concerned with what's going on, especially when right now there is not just a war between Palestine and Israel, but also, like, there is war, airstrikes, for instance, in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Right? So, of course, it's a hot topic. But at the same time, you see, right now, the relations between China and the Middle East are really on the rise, and there are a lot of things going on, a lot of projects. So for instance, many businessmen think that, maybe there are going to be more opportunities for cooperation in the future. And even, like, overseas students, for instance. So a lot of students in China, so in the past, it's like, a lot of them choose to go to, either, the United States or, like, European countries.

Chuchu Zhang:

But today, many of them are also thinking of the Middle East. Well, one of the reasons is that there are lots of actual, European and American universities, which have campuses in the Middle East, of course. So, like, people are learning about the region and they know more about the place and they think that it's like it's like in the past, like, everybody thinks that, probably, it's somewhere very dangerous, a lot of risks. But right now, like, they're They know better about the place, and they are trying to develop the knowledge about it.

Jonathan Fulton:

Mhmm. But just, you know, in terms of, And and I agree because I can see being based here in Abu Dhabi, you know, we've been seeing a lot more over the past, I'd say, 6 to 8 months. A lot more people from China are coming in whether they're coming as business people or investors or or companies looking to, You know, either get investors or to start a project. It's been moving a lot in that direction in the past few months, which I think everybody's happy about after a dry spell post COVID. But at the same time, just, you know, in terms of, Like a foreign policy hierarchy of interest. Like, obviously, decision makers can't give equal attention to everything. You've got limited bandwidth, limited time and resources. Is the Middle East anywhere near the top of the agenda, do you think, for people in Beijing when they're thinking about the world?

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. Regarding the hierarchy of, like, our foreign agenda. So I would say that, like China, I don't want to. So first of all, China does not have a lot of core interests in the region. So when

we talk about core interests, it's like, for instance, one China policy, like our territorial, issues like sovereignty, all those things. So we don't have this kind of thing in the Middle East. So that is the first thing. And the 2nd point is that China does not want to confront the United States in the Middle East because, okay, there are a lot of other things to worry about, But why don't we confront them in the Middle East? Right? So, I would say that it's not like a first or top priority of China, at the moment.

Chuchu Zhang:

But, of course, its importance is, like, on the rise. So, of course, there is the energy issue. There is an economic issue. And also, like, the place itself is becoming more and more important because on the one hand, they have a big influence on what's going on in the other parts of the world. And secondly, I would say that the Middle East is not just a region, but also is like an arena. A big power is struggling. So what's going on in the Middle East is not only like, it's not that just the regional players are struggling with each other in the region, but also, like, big powers in the world are also playing, Like, doing a lot of actions in the region. Right? So that is what makes the region very important. And, also, as I just mentioned, it's also like an intersection between the east and west because so the region, if you want to, like, Talk to the west, for instance, and a lot of this kind of negotiation also have a relation to the region, and that's what make the region very important right now.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. So you mentioned a few minutes ago, October 7th, and I just wonder how much That is a pivot point in the eyes of people in China when they think about the region. Like, is this really Causing a recalibration. Are people thinking about, you know, should China approach the region differently? How does it change the landscape for folks in China?

Chuchu Zhang:

Okay. So, first of all, China thinks that Middle East policy has some kind of consistency. So, China has always insisted that Palestinian -Israeli affair is the core issue of the Middle East Peace process. So it's like over the past few years when everybody was talking about the Abraham Accords, and, a lot of people, you know, think that, okay, there is going to be Arab based real reconciliation. China never believed that the Arabic Israel reconciliation can work without solving the conflicts between Israel and Palestine. So, that is the first, you know, policy. And secondly, I would say that after the eruption of the wall between Hamas and Israel after October 7th of last year. I think that right now, a lot of, like, Chinese Middle Eastern specialists or Our strategists are perceiving the event as an indicator to test the effectiveness of the United States' hegemony in the Middle East.

Chuchu Zhang:

So it's like, okay. If under the United States support or if Israel achieves its 3 goals It proposed, including eliminating Hamas, including, safely rescuing all the hostages and lifting the security threat, to Israel in Gaza, then, it indicates that the United States hegemony remains strong. But otherwise, if, like, these kinds of goals have not been achieved, then it's Probably indicates that the hegemony of the United States in the region or its capacity of shaping the landscape in the

region is not like before. And meanwhile, I think that China is also concerned about the relationship between the Russia, Ukraine conflict and the Palestine, Israel conflict. So just as we just, discussed, when we talk about the Middle East, the importance of the region is that it's not just about This particular region, but also, like, its destiny and what happened in the region is also related to the other regions and other important, like, So in recent months, it's like the international focus has been on the Palestine Israel conflict, and the people Discuss less about what happens in Ukraine, and Russia, and even a lot of aid comes to, to to Israel. Right. So it's not going to Ukraine. So right now, what's going to happen and, so how, the ongoing Palestine-Israel conflict can affect the warfare between Russia and Ukraine, and I think, China is also concerned with that.

Chuchu Zhang:

So I would say that the Palestine Israel conflict is not just about Palestine and Israel right now. The United States has Started to launch air strikes against Syria and Iraq, and we know that Syria is Russia's most important foothold in the region. So is that going to affect Russia's influence on the region? I think that is another concern.

Jonathan Fulton:

Mhmm. So you mentioned a couple of minutes ago that, US and China, there's a consistency of interest in the region. And you're also talking just a minute ago about US hegemony in the region. So how comfortable Do you think Chinese leaders are with the idea of a US centered Middle Eastern border? I mean, I know that it doesn't look right now, it doesn't look like there's much in the way of order in the region. But if I look at the countries that China does the most with in the Middle East, a lot of those countries like the Emirates and Saudi Arabia and Egypt are US allies or partners. So China works very closely with countries that have very dense relationships with the US. What do you think the relationship between this China US Middle East triangle is from Beijing's perspective?

Chuchu Zhang:

Okay. So, right, there is a triangle, and the issue is that first of all, There does not have to be a confrontation. So for instance, we also often talk about, like, size. But the issue is that although there are some competitions between China and the United States, as I just mentioned, they also have a lot of overlapping interests. There are a lot of things that they can do together in the region. So, and also, like, They don't have a lot of, like, core, topics that they have to be in in confrontation with each other. I mean, they can have more on the other issues. So it's not just necessarily about this particular region in the Middle East.

Chuchu Zhang:

So, that is the first issue. And also, like, we also have to ask about the regional actors' opinion because we often say that it's like, The big powers are playing the region. But actually, like, who is playing? How about the regional actors? They have a lot of, like, their own interests, like, ads. So, actually, the regional actors, men in many occasions, are playing a very active role. And they don't want to be like they were before, and they no longer want to just become allies of 1 particular camp, or actor. And what they are doing right now is just to pursue diversification of

their partners in the world. So, that is how I look at, you know, the triangle issue. It's like, it's not like, okay.

Chuchu Zhang:

Are you going to choose between McDonald or KFC? See, why don't I just have dinner in McDonald's, but I can also have lunch in case.

Jonathan Fulton:

Nice. We should write a paper, you know, you know, using fast food restaurants as an analogy for Middle Eastern politics. I don't think that's been done yet. No. It's interesting because like you said, from a local actors' perspective, you know, and we've had several people from the region on the show, and they've given a very similar, you know, overview to what you've just said of their approach. But it's interesting because it's rare we hear directly from Chinese Middle East specialists. So it's a useful perspective, I think, for the audience. I'd I'd happen to agree.

Jonathan Fulton:

I think that, you know, just looking at the indicators of China's presence, a lot of it, like I said, are with, you know, the places where China is the deepest are also places that have US security commitments. So it seems to me that leaders in China don't really see, you know, their relationship with the US as, you know, something that is necessarily a negative thing at least when they look at the Middle East. But, you know, that's that that gets more into the thinking of domestic political actors, and and, we're not gonna really hear from these guys in either country. Just coming back to kind of regional hot spot events. There's been a lot of talk recently about the Red Sea, you know, because, obviously, China's got a lot of assets, a lot of investments on both sides, on both coastlines of the Red Sea. There's a very large expatriate population in the Middle East. I've heard, you know, maybe about half a 1000000 Chinese people live in the region. That wouldn't lead us to expect China to play a pretty big role in regional affairs when things start to look very fragile like they have been, recently.

Jonathan Fulton:

So would you anticipate China playing a more active role in addressing, The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. I would say that China is very concerned with what's going on in the Red Sea. And first of all, I think we have to make it very clear that China is also a big victim of the Red Sea crisis. It's not beneficial at all. Disruption of the navigation in the Red Sea, actually, negatively affects the trade flows between China and the Middle East and also Europe. So, for instance, I am currently based in Shanghai, and have lots of business. Many in Shanghai are very worried and sad because the transport fees and the insurance costs are rising. So, like, it has a very big negative impact on our trade. So China calls for maintaining international navigation order.

Chuchu Zhang:

Also, as you know, China has the maritime Silk Road. So, like, any kind of obstruction of maritime shipping channels is not in line with China's own interest. But I think that right now, like, people are saying, like, for instance, China's actions. I would say that China is very concerned about the boundaries of external intervention in the region because right now, the situation is becoming more and more complicated. And, I think maybe the Chinese are worried about the escalation of proxy conflicts in Yemen, which they believe can only worsen the regional security situation. So it's like at present, they are air strikes against the Houthi rebels. But the purpose of these actions aren't very vague and not very clear. So China is, like, concerned, is it going to work and really solve The problem, like, doesn't really help.

Chuchu Zhang:

So China is worried that this kind of air strikes can provide an opportunity for external powers to intervene In Yemen's political process and it's kind of like shaping a political landscape, conducive to pro American forces. And what kind of makes it even worse is that this kind of action can also provoke a new round of power struggle and proxy wars Between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Yemen, which is not what China wants to see.

Jonathan Fulton:

So when you talk about proxy warfare, that really kind of anticipated my next question. Because a lot of the issues That have been shaping regional events, especially recently, but obviously for far longer are coming from non-state actors, whether you've got The Hamas attack or Houthi attack or the threat of Hezbollah getting more deeply involved in these militias in Iraq. Of course, China has made it pretty clear, over the past several decades, that Sovereignty and non interference in domestic affairs is a very important priority for them. And I think a lot of that is because of China's own Potential weakness . If China were to engage with non-state actors here, then what's to stop everybody from engaging with, You know, people in Xinjiang or Tibet or Hong Kong or whatever. So how does China reconcile this? What Influence or engagement can or does China have with these types of groups that are shaping events in a way that's disruptive to its interests, While at the same time respecting sovereignty and trying to, you know, stay out of that side of things.

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. And, this is also a very interesting Question. I think that's okay. So China still, I anticipate that China will still insist on the Intergovernmental interactions as it usually does, and it will only interact with governments or the authorities recognized by the United Nations. But I think not engaging Or not directly engaging with nongovernmental armed groups does not mean that these groups are not considered as important. So I think China's logic is very simple. It does not want to interfere with the internal affairs of The other countries, and as you mentioned, they are the sovereignty issues. And in return, of course, China expects that it doesn't want other countries to interfere with its own internal affairs, through these kinds of, like, nongovernmental groups.

Chuchu Zhang:

So that is it's like diplomatic principle. And second, there is another issue because, actually, I think just now you used a very interesting word that is, weakness. So, actually, I think China considers that there, is also a risk of working with nongovernmental armed groups. So, when you say, like, weakness, then there should be, like, the opposite words that is Advantage. So I would say that the advantage of working with these groups is that they are very flexible. But the disadvantage of working with non-governmental armed groups is that they are very flexible because they do not need to comply with United Nations Charter or international norms, etcetera. So, for non-government armed groups, the cost of violating, International law or violating contracts is minimal. So, for instance, you see Okay.

Chuchu Zhang:

For instance, China, as we just mentioned, like, it always has a principle of not working with non government groups. So it's like it doesn't have Rich experience. But let's say the United States has a rich experience in this sense, but even my states sometimes find it very difficult to control The armed groups it works with, for instance, let's see what's going on in the CRB, etcetera. So sometimes when the big powers work with the armed groups, They can become very passive in many cases. So I think China is very careful about it. And thirdly, I think, today, we see a lot of proxy wars, not only in the Middle East, but also in the world. And this is because, as you mentioned, again, there is an advantage of working with non government armed groups because a lot of big powers are reluctant to engage in direct combat, direct confrontation themselves. And, like, in order to save the cause and avoid risks, They support non government groups to do things for them as agents.

Chuchu Zhang:

But China believes that if itself engages with, this kind of groups, then it can only exacerbate proxy conflicts and make the regional situation even more complicated. So on the one hand, China wants to do business with everybody. So escalation of proxy conflicts is not something China wants. But on the other hand, making a balance between different size in the region is already very difficult for China. You see? And, like, if you try to engage with non-government groups, like, as there are many of them very complicated, and this can only make things more difficult, and it can add pressure for China and its officials, which is obviously not in China's emphasis.

Jonathan Fulton:

Mhmm. So the common thread in each of those actors we're talking about is Iran. You know, Hezbollah or Hamas or the Houthis. Iran is very deeply engaged with each of them. And of course, China and Iran have a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement. China's Always Iran's number one trade partner. They cooperate in BRICS now and SCO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well. And I know that this relationship is one that people outside the region focus on a lot.

Jonathan Fulton:

There's a deep concern that China and Iran working in tandem, and especially with Russia these days, is something that could undermine Regional stability or other actors' interests. What do you think we should think about this bilateral China Iran partnership?

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. So, first of all, indeed, I agree that today, China and Iran have very intimate relations with each other. Of course, China has lots of interests in Iran, such as energy. But also, I would say it is very important to note that China focuses on its own national interests, of course. So in recent years, people are saying that, okay, China has sometimes criticized the United States on Iranian issues, for instance. But I would say from my own observation, That is because the United States policies in Iran, such as some of the sanctions, have harmed China's own interests. Like, China's, Like, on business with Iran is also, like, affected. So the logic is not that, because China wants to True sides or stands by Iran and criticizes the United States, but it's that China wants to safeguard its own interests.

Chuchu Zhang:

And that is a very important concern. And the 2nd issue is that, some commentators believe that China is kind of siding with Iran and the so-called Shia Arc, re-including many of the groups you have just mentioned in our previous question. But I would say, in fact, The Shia arc is not always acting in 1 voice. And also, like, from the perspective of China, it's not like, okay. Like, it's okay. It's Iran that is, deciding everything, and it's not that straightforward. Right? And you can't just deny that there are lots of autonomies, of the armed groups themselves. And, also, if you look at how China interacts with regional powers, you will find it interesting.

Chuchu Zhang:

The issue is that although there are lots of multilateral mechanisms, China is better at and more used to Developing bilateral relations. So it's like China lacks the intention and capacity, and tradition to work with the so called, Shia click as a whole. And also, another point, I would add is that The close relationship between China and Iran right now, I think, is just a manifestation of the diversification of diplomatic partners between both sides. Okay. So on the one hand, China does not just approach Yes. There are lots of, like, interactions, intimate cooperation between the two parts. But it's not just about China and Iran. China has also established closer ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE address But we have just discussed.

Chuchu Zhang:

And it's the same thing, for the part of Iran. It's not just developing ties with China. And if you look at what's going on In recent years, it has also, like, close ties with India as well as many other powers. So it's like, working, Like, for both sides. And also, last but not the least, when it comes to the very interesting international organizations, like The or SCO as you have just mentioned. I think we are used to asking questions like why something But we can also ask questions in another way. We can also ask why not. So for example, I think there is a rule in international relations, that diplomatic isolation can easily trigger a country's anti international, system behavior.

Chuchu Zhang:

So it's like if Iran or another country is absorbed into the multilateral international organizations, then, of course, it will help enhance Iran's International responsibility and reduce the anxiety caused by diplomatic isolation. So why not? And at the same time, from the perspective of the A functionalist theory, you know, putting conflicting parties into 1 platform and multilateral mechanisms can also help, promote cooperation and trust among them. And, like, one very obvious example is The European Union, right, itself is a mechanism for resolving conflicts between Germany and France, etcetera. So why not encourage Iran to work together in international organizations. Right?

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Okay. Well, last question. We talked just now about the Iran China partnership. This is a mechanism I think is very interesting. I know your colleague, Sun Togang, has written a lot on China's partnership diplomacy. I think what we see through its partnership agreements in the region and its economically driven approach to the region, I mean, the one thing that characterizes the Middle East is a lot of intense regional rivalries. Yet China's definitely managed to avoid overtly taking sides in any of them.

Jonathan Fulton:

For a lot of people outside observing this, they think this is not sustainable. That eventually China's gonna have to pick sides. What do you think? If you know, on something like the China Iran rivalry or you know, is China going to be able to maintain this balancing act indefinitely?

Chuchu Zhang:

Right. This is also, like, a very interesting question. So, first of all, I think very , so I think there is a very different mindset regarding this issue when it talks about China. So I think China does not assume That's the sectarian confrontation in the Middle East is ingrained. So in fact, the regional actors do not have to confront each other and fight each other. So when we talk about taking sides, a lot of people may think that, okay, there is Already like a confrontation between different parts, and now we have to choose size. But, China does not think in that way. So China has proposed the Concept of promoting peace through development.

Chuchu Zhang:

A lot of people are talking about it. And many people when they try to interpret this new term, they think that, okay, it means China wants to promote regional states to work with each other. So they have a lot of common interests. And so, so it's going to, like, to promote peace. But many people, also they are saying this model is not always working because it's not going to solve, like, all of the problems there. Well, I want to say that, that is only part of the picture because actually I, from my own observation, there may be another meaning of promoting peace through development. So that is why we don't rethink our diplomatic agenda. As you just mentioned, like, the hierarchy of foreign, of the real national interest of our agenda. So what is the priority for a country? Do we want to develop our countries? Right? Or should we prioritize confrontation with other regional actors and invest everything in fighting each other? So what is the priority? And I think the most important point about the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia

and Iran is not to show how great China is, But it's to show that there does not have to be sectarian confrontation in the region.

Chuchu Zhang:

So in other words, we may not assume that they are Secretariat camps, and we have to choose size. But maybe the assumption itself is questionable. And the second issue is that China does not want to choose size because it believes that this kind of behavior will lead to rigidity of international relations. And, if you look at China's own, you know, foreign policy right now, it seeks to have more space of flexibility. And I think, for the other side, like, the Middle East countries are thinking the same way. So it's like both China and Middle Eastern countries are Pursuing strategic autonomy and want to give themselves flexible space for actions. So in fact, I think the Middle Eastern countries face themselves. They also do not want to be deeply bound to China and criticized between China and the United States.

Chuchu Zhang:

Right? So the same logic also applies to China. So for both sides, I think, neither China nor Middle Eastern actors want to choose sides. And I think there is another important point, which is also very interesting, is that today, even if you ask China and you push China to True size in the region. I think it doesn't know how because you see the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape is becoming unprecedentedly complicated. So the region does not only have 2 camps, but have, I would say, highly diversified interests. So, for instance, regarding the ongoing, Israel, Palestinian conflict, is it that there are only 2 camps? Okay. On one side, there are Arab countries on the other side. There's Israel.

Chuchu Zhang:

It's not like that. So right now, what do Arab countries think about Palestine, Israeli conflicts? Right. There are lots of things going on, but as we just discussed, a lot of actions are taken by, nongovernmental, groups. Right? But how about the governments? A lot of Arab governments don't have a big voice. Right? And they are not doing much. So it's not like they are just 2 camps. Right? Like, one side there is Arab states, one side there is Israel. It's not like that.

Chuchu Zhang:

And also if you talk about Iran and Saudi Arabia, it's not. But it's also not like before. I don't think right now, like, there is a real confrontation between Sony And Shia camps, then then then then what is Qatar doing? Right? Right? And also Saudi Arabia, 9 United Arab Emirates, Like, they have lots of disputes with each other, lots of competition. So it's like, even if you want China to take sides, it doesn't know, like, where to stand.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's great. Chuchu, thanks so much for doing this. It was really fun for me to see you again, And I'm sure our listeners got a lot out of this. I think you gave a really useful perspective. And, I hope we can do this again sometime soon.

Chuchu Zhang:

Thank you so much. Thanks so much, Jonathan. And, have a nice day. Thank you.

Jonathan Fulton:

Thanks. You too. And to our listeners, thank you for joining us. We've got a really great show lined up, next. So come listen again, and, And make sure you go on to all those podcast platforms and like and rate and subscribe and do all that good stuff. Thank you all very much.