

In this episode, host Jonathan Fulton and guest Kerry Brown discuss the domestic drivers shaping China's engagements in the Middle East. They unravel the complexities of China's internal landscape, including the middle-class aspirations and interest in international relations and the impact of Xi Jinping's leadership. Jonathan and Kerry also analyze China's internal party dynamics and the intimate link between China's international interests and what serves the party-state's stability, shedding light on its diplomatic decision-making and potential implications for MENA. Join us for a thought-provoking exploration of China's foreign policy strategy and domestic underpinnings.

Takeaways

- China's Domestic Drivers of Foreign Policy in MENA
- China's Core Interests and Soft Power Projection in MENA
- China's Global Role and Soft Power Challenges
- China's Influence in the Middle East and Domestic Influences on Foreign Policy

Quotes

"It's strange how China tries to change public opinion while facing an image problem. People love their cuisine and kung fu, but the political system makes it challenging for them to win hearts."- Kerry Brown

"Understanding China is complex, but it's crucial to find a balanced perspective in Western discourse."- Kerry Brown

Featured in the Episode

Kerry Brown

Professor of Chinese Studies, and Director,
Lau China Institute, King's College, London

LinkedIn: <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/kerrybrown>

Website: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/kerry-brown>

Jonathan Fulton

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

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

<https://twitter.com/jonathandfulton>

Chapters

00:00 - Introduction

04:47 - Concerns about leadership future raised by Premier's performance
08:23 - China's passive stance in world affairs
11:20 - Impact of changes in US leadership on China's strategy
15:22 - Reshuffling of China's internal priorities during the Trump presidency
18:26 - Chinese middle class's interest in international relations
21:05 - Summary of Evan Osnos' article on Chinese concerns
25:31 - Intrigue within the party and navigating power dynamics
27:35 - China's core interests as an intimate link between China's international interests and what serves the stability of the party-state
31:51 - China's focus on regional stability and development
36:36 - China's dominance reshaping the world with little commonality
39:45 - Comparison of envy towards South Korean culture and China
43:10 - China's crucial role in the Middle East
45:27 - Taiwan's Unresolved Status: A Ticking Time Bomb
46:21 - Conclusion

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 Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. As China's interests and influence in the Middle East grow, there has been a lot of analysis of China's regional foreign policy that assumes that the PRC is well positioned to be the next great extra regional power. Looking at the arc of trade, investment, contracting, and tax transfers over the past 15 to 20 years shows us that the Middle East matters to Beijing a lot more than it did at the turn of the century. At the same time, these reports of China MENA relations rarely get into the domestic factors that are influencing Chinese decision makers. Any reasonable analysis of a country's foreign policy has to look inside as well To get a sense of the domestic, political and economic pressures from within. To help us get a better sense of the relationship between China's domestic politics and its foreign policy, I'm happy to be joined by Carrie Brown, who among many other affiliations is professor of Chinese studies and director of the Lao China Institute at King's College London. From 1995 1998 to 2005, he worked at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office with a posting as 1st secretary at the British embassy in Beijing.

Jonathan Fulton:

He has published an incredible output of books and journal articles on modern Chinese politics and history, Getting close to occupying an entire shelf of my bookcase at this point. Gary, welcome to the show. Thank you. So, look, just to set the stage, there's been a lot less information coming out of China Over the past few years than what we were used to, before COVID, we're not getting the same kind of economic data. We're

not getting the same kind of journalism out of China. So people are working often on assumptions or or or just kind of Chinese whispers sometimes. So what do you see as the political and economic pressures that are driving decisions in Beijing these days?

Kerry Brown:

Yeah. Thank you, Jonathan. You're right. I mean, I think in my 30 years of dealing with China, I can't remember A period when it was so difficult to get access. Part of that because of the pandemic and the fact that there's just not been the same kind of physical contact Between the outside world and China, although that's picking up a bit. I'm part of it because of difficult relations with America in particular. There was a journalist tit for tat, about 3 years ago, and that had a big impact. I mean, some very fine journalists who, you know, are getting access in China just are operating now.

Kerry Brown:

So it's really difficult to see what's Tapping. What we can see, though, is signs which are not very reassuring. Firstly, some really kind of capricious signs over Personnel decisions, the removal of the foreign minister after only being in office a few months, the removal of the minister of defense last year, Li Xiangfu, after, I think literally a few weeks as the minister of defense, end of last year, removal of a number of PLA people, in the Rocket Force area. Again, these are sort of yeah. I mean, they're not individually such a big deal, I guess, but they're not reassuring. They're kind of A sign of a highly deliberative system that doesn't seem to be particularly deliberative at the moment. And we have to remember that these are appointments made when, In theory, at least, Xi Jinping is all dominant. I think what we can see is a political environment which is dominated by some serious economic issues.

Kerry Brown:

And these are around issues of sustaining Good growth, about youth unemployment, which is apparently about 20%. Perpetual issues with the housing market, which I've been there a long time, but they seem to sort of get more and more worrying. And then issues of whether the government Has a real game plan for how it's gonna develop its economy going forward. And then looming over this, I say the final thing is A sort of question mark over Xi Jinping. He has been sort of erratic in some ways at present, for instance, at, you know, the BRIC summit, but not really speaking. Not present at the G20. He sent his premier. Lee Chang was also sent to Davos only last week.

Kerry Brown:

You know, it kind of seems that the premier is doing a lot of the stuff that once the president did, And that might mean not a great deal, or it might mean that there's issues. It's gonna have to be quite Soon that there's some idea of who may well one

day replace Xi Jinping. I mean, he can't continue forever. And the idea of this huge system having, you know, such reliance on 1 leader when that leader is Maybe not functioning at a 100%, particularly in view of what might be happening in America later this year and what might be happening in In the rest of the world with 40 elections in 2024, this is gonna be a very, very tough year. You need someone at the peak of their powers and performance, and it's Not entirely clear who Xi Jinping is. So I find it a little bit, yeah, quite concerning at the moment.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. One thing I see is a lot more people from China are going out, you know, to use a well used phrase, and looking for a lot of investment. You know, we see a lot of people looking for investment into real estate primarily, but other sectors as well. And I think what you're speaking of, when the system is so so dominated by a single personality and we just don't know. Like, the information we're getting isn't good. You know, there's been so many rumors of health issues and, you know, and it could just be rumors. But the fact that we don't have complete information is, I think, pretty worrying. I think, yeah, you gave us a really good overview.

Jonathan Fulton:

I mean, with the high youth unemployment and the slow economic growth, all these things are a big story. How do you think this stuff shapes China's foreign policy agenda?

Kerry Brown:

Well, it's, Clear that the pandemic has had a kind of systematic impact on China's relations with the world. It's created a sort of 2, 2 zone world where, I think those that were benign or, you know, more kind of Transactional mind minded, they're able to create relations with China as always. I mean, you know, the Middle East where you're based. I mean, Saudi Arabia seems to be able to work with China, although, you know, maybe there's some questions over whether they should, but they seem to. Russia obviously is now continuing to be close to China. You know, on the other hand, there's increased antipathy by America, Europe, and others towards the idea of a world which is too dominated by China. Lots of pushback. And I think the stresses on the Chinese foreign policy now are quite serious.

Kerry Brown:

2 examples, I guess, which really show that. 1 is, of course, the Ukrainian issue, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Well, China has kind of not left the side of Russia. It shows loyalty. However, it's been difficult. I think it's not really totally in China's interest to have this huge kind of drain on geopolitical attention and also the economy, with Russia and Ukraine. And on the other hand, the Middle East, the Israeli action in Gaza. I mean,

China has offered a kind of peace proposal or a 2 state solution. It's one of the very few powers that has Relations with all the parties.

Kerry Brown:

I mean, I'm able to work with the Palestinian organization. It's able to work with the Israelis. But I think it's not able to say anything except kinda empty platitudes in a way. I mean, you know, this is a great power with a huge economic clout now, and yet it seems to be very unwilling to kind of step forward. I suppose that to me sort of shows This narrative of China being the dominant new, you know, hegemon, well, I mean, it's had 2 big opportunities to really, really go in and dominate because no one else seems to know what to do, and it's it's not really done anything. And I suspect going forward, Our problem geopolitically will be not a China which is very, very forceful and coming to the fore and basically, you know, stepping up and Kind of giving it to us. It's gonna be a China that just does not wanna get involved no matter even if it should get involved, A passive China rather than an active China. And I think that we're starting to really see that, a China which is inactive rather than overactive, which is not the problem that most people tend to attribute to China, at the moment, particularly in America and Europe.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's a great point because I've had a lot of conversations this week and last week. Everybody wants to talk about the Red Sea, the Houthi attack on shipping. And one thing that keeps coming up is folks will say, look. China's got this military installation in Djibouti. They've got naval vessels in the Red Sea. China is, of course, a very important maritime shipping country, relying so much on maritime trade. Why aren't they doing anything? And I think a lot of governments in the region expected a more robust response from China to this. But what you've seen is China Seems to be very reluctant to get involved in any kind of free riding to say, hey.

Jonathan Fulton:

We're going to criticize the US for its support to Israel. At the same time, We're going to let America do the heavy lifting on this crucial issue that's very important to us. And I think a lot of people in the region are looking at it and going a little off guard, saying, well, we thought you were the next great power. Why are you acting, you know, why are you free riding? Why aren't you doing more? So there is a pretty big gap between perception and reality right now. Do you think that's because in Beijing there's just a lack of a sense that this is important to play a bigger role? Or is it that they don't see themselves In in those terms that they don't see themselves as a global power that has those kind of responsibilities, that they're they're happy to just be kind of a trading power and Leave it at that, because the narrative has been a lot about, you know, Chinese alternatives. Right? We've got different global security and global development

initiatives. We're a new type of great power, and we're just not seeing any meat on the bone yet. So what do you think accounts for that?

Kerry Brown:

Yeah. It's a great Question, Jonathan. I mean, I think we have to think a lot about the very surprising things that have been happening in the United States in the last half a decade and which are happening, you know, as we speak now. Yeah. I think for China in particular, its worldview was The United States was going to be the dominant, you know, kind of power for the foreseeable future. You know? And There were problems with that for China, but it assumed that this was gonna be the geopolitics that it would have to work around. And I think the way in which particularly the Trump presidency, the first one, kind of questioned the commitment of America to, You know, global leadership role and and may well, you know, kinda come back to that if Trump is reelected later this year, I think has completely thrown China. I mean, I think it makes a lot of sense why China has gone into this huddle. It's so defensive because in fact, it kind of needed to play off the American security blanket.

Kerry Brown:

You know, the fact that it didn't like it, but it was very predictable. It knew what it was dealing with. And now it's in this position of A world of really great uncertainty. It doesn't really know what it's gonna be dealing with from, you know, November. It may be more of the same if Biden's reelected, if Biden does stand. It may mean if Trump stands that you're gonna have real chaos. And I think that China, more than any other power, is completely unsettled by this. Because, Of course, as the world's 2nd biggest economy, it's kind of meant to step in in some areas where America is just not gonna be functioning maybe, but not wanting to function.

Kerry Brown:

If you look at the core issue that matters to China, its own region, the South and East China Sea and, of course, Taiwan, You know, in a sense, the Trump presidency is gonna be, if it happens, an opportunity because, you know, I I don't think that Trump looks like he's gonna stand by Taiwan. I mean, that's possible. That's absolutely possible. On the other hand, I've looked at all of the scenarios about what could happen with Taiwan. None of them are easily manageable for China if it makes a proactive move. They're all pretty scary. They're all gonna be really, really tough. And as you know, the election, earlier this month, January, saw the election of DPP who is, you know, a strong supporter of sovereignty.

Kerry Brown:

This is not gonna be an easy thing for China to deal with. So I think that this is really the way in which America is not acting in the way that China, I think expected, is deeply unsettling to it. It sounds strange really because you think that, you know, an America which was willing to kind of Disappear a bit and, you know, kind of withdraw would be good for China, but I don't think it is. I think it's really thrown at them.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yep. I agree. I mean, if you look back to all the leadership statements, pre Trump, you know, the BRI is meant to be complimentary. It's Supposed to buttress the existing order to address its, you know, structural weaknesses. And then you see after Trump, There's this kind of assumption that the West is fractured, that NATO doesn't count, and you see all these more ambitious statements saying, you know, the Global Development Initiative. We have a different approach, and we've got a new type of great power with a new idea about how things are supposed to work. But I think things change so quickly, you know, from Trump to Biden again, where, again, the West looked more coherent than it did. And these alignments or alliances Had more to them than what China had seen over the previous 4 years, and I think it really put them on their back foot.

Jonathan Fulton:

So I think you're right. Like, another Trump presidency is going to really, you know, reshuffle the deck for them in a way that, I imagine, is very unsettling. Going back to the internal stuff in China, I mean, I I I just recently went to the Carrie Brown shelf in the bookcase, And I saw your book from 2017, China's World, which is really really great. And there was a line that struck me. You wrote China has a middle class that is anything from 300 to 500,000,000 strong. The party state has to keep this demanding highly expectant group of people happy, And therefore, only interested in the outside world in ways that assist this. And I've thought about that. I thought that's a really good distillation of something that I've been trying to say to people for quite a while around here that, you know, for the party, which is so consumed with environmental issues and wealth distribution issues and and, You know, rural and urban divide and finding jobs for young people and creating a sustainable economy and all this stuff, I mean, that has to consume something like 85 to 90% of their bandwidth.

Jonathan Fulton:

And I keep looking at the relationships with other countries that you mentioned CORE, earlier, and we'll come back to that in a couple of minutes. But Those countries that are kind of outside of its immediate periphery, you know, I think their significance lies in how they can help support China in this domestic stuff. So Just looking at this sentence of

yours from the book, can you kind of impact this a bit? Like, why do you see The CCP is less interested in international affairs?

Kerry Brown:

Yeah. I mean, I think, the middle class you just referred to, you know, kind of their role. One of the weird things about the Chinese Government. I mean, people often think it's completely heedless of public opinion. I mean, you know, it doesn't really have any evidence of public opinion. There's no election. So, you know, it's like it's all repressed. To me, I read a description from a 180 years ago, actually, which I thought still applied, a British person, I think, in China in the 18 thirties who said, The thing about the Chinese government then was it was obsessed by public opinion about every little thing, and all these officials would just be listening terrified in the slightest kind of sign of problems.

Kerry Brown:

They would, you know, try and be managing it, and, you know, they would sort of just be managing and firefighting all the time. It was in a perpetual kind of crisis, and I don't think that's really changed. I mean, social media and other things have given the Chinese government, you know, a lot of access to what Chinese people think. And it's always responding in a way. It's always doing stuff and responding. And we saw maybe doing the kind of, end of 2022 when there were the protests against, you know, COVID and lockdowns. The Chinese government kinda literally chucked all its regulations out of the window within a matter of days. So it does respond.

Kerry Brown:

I mean, I think on, you know, this question of international relations and whether this matters to the Chinese middle class. I mean, I mean, I think so firstly, I think China's status matters to the middle class. They want their country to kind of look respected and good. And in a weird way, Xi Jinping is kind of good at that because, you know, he obviously has status. He fits you know, he does terrify people, and that's not a bad thing for, you know, the Chinese to look at their leader being so impactful. I think the second thing is that the Chinese middle class clearly want to have connections for education and investment with the wider world. You know, non-state companies still wanna come out and do stuff. You said earlier about how there are more Chinese coming out of China now, you know, after the pandemic and, you know, looking at opportunities.

Kerry Brown:

So they do want to have a sort of global role. And I think finally, I think that there is obviously, this sort of trend lately of, you know, some wealthier Chinese looking to just get out of the country. I mean, this has been happening, I think, in Canada and, I mean,

also up to an extent in America. It's a kind of Strange situation where you've got a very nationalistic environment where people are very patriotic, and yet you have a lot of people voting with their feet. Yeah. It's hard to assess this because, you know, people are always looking for new opportunities. People are migrating left, right, and center. So, you know, I don't know whether it's Kind of very deep and meaningful, but I think it shows that public opinion in China is not something you can ever make big assumptions about.

Kerry Brown:

You know, people can say it's nationalistic. Well, maybe it is. But, I mean, you know, maybe it's also extremely critical of its government. And I think that's not just true of the outside world. I think the Chinese government is also not 100% sure what its people are thinking. And I think that this, you know, is a kind of factor we're gonna have to watch this year because if the economy is tough and it may go into poor growth or even negative growth. It's possible. This is a China that we haven't seen for a long, long time, a China which is Ailing economically.

Kerry Brown:

We haven't seen that. And, politically, I can't predict what that place will look like, but I don't think it's gonna be an easy one for the government.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. You know, I I I'm sure you saw it, but Evan Osnos wrote a really good article for the New Yorker. I think about 2 months ago, he went back to Beijing after being gone quite a while and talked to a lot of his friends. And I think he left China at the start of the Xi Jinping era and went back to the States. And, you know, he came back and there was one thing everybody was saying: A lot of people are looking for ways to move their wealth out of the country, move their kids and universities out of the country, and possibly get themselves out. I know a lot of people criticize the article for him just talking to a very small selection of Chinese people, but I think it does speak to a lot of the concerns people have that, you know, things aren't trending in a direction that it looked like they were even 5 years ago. I remember the last time I was in China in 2019, and there was this real triumphalism. Like, this sense of Things is going where we've seen nothing but blue skies ahead, and I don't think I have been there since then.

Jonathan Fulton:

I don't think that's the case. It's funny when you're talking about protests, like the protests of 0 COVID, and I remember reading about those and thinking this is really weird. But then we're just remembering what it was like at the end of the Hu Jin Tower era when these mass incidents, you know, hundreds and hundreds of mass incidents a

day. You know, Chinese people, I think you're right. There's this sense of complacency in the way people talk about it, and not really realizing what a vibrant Civil culture there is with people that have serious demands. And of course, the government has to pay attention to that because if you aren't paying attention to those constituents, you know, China's a long history of internal collapse. Right?

Kerry Brown:

Yes. Yeah. I mean, I think, it's why the Xi Jinping era is a bit strange because as you rightly said during the Hu Jintao period when you went to China, It wasn't unusual to see protests. I remember seeing protests outside a hospital in Shanghai. I remember going to, A government office, I think, the mayor's office or something in Mongolia in Guwahati. And, you know, there was a demonstration of elderly, think military people who hadn't got their pensions I mean, everywhere you went, people seemed to sort of be kicking up a fuss, and it wasn't, it wasn't hard to find that. Whereas under Xi Jinping, it's so placid, you know, and yet I don't think society's got less complicated. No way.

Kerry Brown:

I mean, I think there's still obviously big issues of, you know, social justice, inequity, and, you know, inequality. It seems though that it's been pushed under a kind of, you know, sort of barrier so that you just don't see it. And I guess on the elite level, what is really weird is there's no sign at the elite level of Big pushback against Xi. You know? I mean, he's had no one really oppose him, as he sort of has had his ascent in the last 10 years. Not really. I mean, if you think, in the Hu Jintao period, you know, you had a brief period when Wen Jiabao was talking about democracy. In the Jiang Zemin period, you had, you know, significant opposition to him by big figures like who got, you know, kicked out of the politburo. Mao Zedong had to deal with opposition.

Kerry Brown:

You know? I mean and that was Extremely costly for those who opposed him, but there were opponents. Under Xi Jinping, it's, like, weird. Where have they all gone? You know? Is it really the case that This enormously complicated country with all of the complex issues it's facing, has no one with a different view. I mean, that there's no one in the elite that Has maybe sort of some skepticism about Xi's approach. That's really the thing that I'm. I'm sort of Wondering where it's like the dog that didn't bark in the night. You know? Where where's the opponents? Where have they gone? Is it really the case that there's no one who thinks that he's, you know, doing anything, you know, kind of wrong. And I wonder whether One day, we will kind of think, wow. We missed that.

Kerry Brown:

There were really obvious signs. You know? There were things that we saw, you know, the Kind of weird removal of Hu Jintao at the congress a couple of years ago. Maybe this was very significant. These things that will make sense afterwards. But as of today, I have to say, you know, it's very hard to see any really high elite divisions. And that's very, very strange, but it's very striking.

Jonathan Fulton:

It is strange because, you know, you just look back, there were institutionalized factions within the party always. Right? There is the Communist Youth League. There's the Shanghai clique. There's all these different, you know, poles of power and influence within the party, and navigating that, was really a really important skill, you know, building those networks. And I don't know if it's just that he dismantled all of them, or if everybody's just quietly laying in wait. You know, you mentioned the Hu Jintao removal. And then, of course, there was that, There was that article in Nikkei a couple of months ago about, you know, all the party elders that gave him a stern talking to, You know, which I don't think too many people pull a lot of stock in, but I think there's the sense, like, in in a place that you know, in a party that big, With a lot of ambitious people looking at the the trend lines, there's a lot of folks who are probably thinking, this doesn't look good for us, and, you know, there's probably a lot of space for people to say, you know, let's present some kind of, an alternative. And I I think they're probably looking for the opportune moment because, You don't wanna get caught with your pants down, and, you know, it could be pretty pretty risky, I'm sure.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. You mentioned a couple of minutes ago core interest, and I think that's something when you talked about the East China Sea, or South China Sea rather, or both, I guess, that was something that Susan Shirk, in her last book, brought up. And, you know, I think I hadn't seen that as listed as part of the core interest, but Typically, the core interests were very inward looking, you know, whenever China would talk about it. And the core interests were a kind of a new, Innovation in Chinese diplomatic talk. I think it's only been about 15 years or so that you hear people in Beijing say these are our core interests, these are the most important things. So just for our listeners, like, how did they define core interests, and what does it tell you about its approach to broader foreign policy?

Kerry Brown:

Yeah. I mean, there's this sort of notion of a core interest that came quite late. I think it was under, a state councilor in,

Jonathan Fulton:

I think,

Kerry Brown:

Think 2009, 2010, I think he was actually speaking in America when he was sort of suddenly referred to this idea of these core interests. And what was striking about them at the time was how everything was defined as serving The stability of the party state and its, you know, ability to have stable rule in China. So, You know, there was a kinda intimate link between China's international interests and what served the security of the party state And the socialist system in China. So to come back to our earlier kind of discussion, the internal and the external, you know, are welded together. There's no hairline between them, really. I think one of the things about the Xi Jinping era is a greater willingness to say much more on what China's interests are. I think this is part of an acknowledgment that, under Hu Jintao, China was a silent superpower. You know, it never really kind of said what it wanted, and it was Pretending to be a little mouse when actually it was the size of an elephant.

Kerry Brown:

You know? I mean, it it kind of needed to say more. And I guess, Xi Jinping with the Belt and Road Initiative, and the idea of common prosperity and these things, Well, there is there's been sort of at least some attempt to say what is the China world view. Inevitably, that has created, lots of speculation and lots of, You know, kind of accusations that China has a global vision that it wants to dominate. I think that personally, China is Banned if it does and damned if it doesn't when it speaks about its vision. If it doesn't say anything, people are very suspicious and wonder what it's up to. And if it does say something immediately, people kind of accuse it of having, you know, sort of megalomaniacal kind of, demands. I think what I sort of feel about its core interests are that they they're quite parochial. I mean, they're really about regional security.

Kerry Brown:

You know? The South and East China Sea, Taiwan. These are the sort of, you know, the core things, and I think that's understandable because China wants a zone of such strategic security around it. But there's no sort of sense of it trying to kind of articulate a security doctrine for the Central Asian region. As you know better than me, in the Middle East, it doesn't really have a security doctrine. It doesn't have a security outlook for Africa. It suddenly got more interested in Latin America, but it doesn't really have a security link, you know, idea of that. This is the problem, I guess, that China, when it talks the language of economic benefit, it will have an audience. I think some people will follow it and be interested, of course. But When China speaks the language of security, it's a totally different ballgame.

Kerry Brown:

And there's far fewer who either want to understand what it's talking about, who are or who have much sympathy with it. And I suppose the quandary for China going forward is as it gets more of a kind of global role. It's gonna have to talk about security more. And, you know, life with the Middle East and with Ukraine, the language it's using at the moment is not really fit for purpose. I can't

Jonathan Fulton:

seem to sort of do that. Yeah. Well, that sets up my next question perfectly because I want to bring it back to the Middle East. And, you know, there's a lot you were saying that really got me thinking about it. I mean, one of the things I keep hearing when I talk to folks from the US, there's often the sense of, You know, China kinda marching forward and claiming its space in the world. And I keep trying to remind folks Who don't think about China, you know, kind of at a more granular level. It's in a really tough neighborhood. I mean, it's the domestic stuff that's Really important, and a lot of folks don't think about that. But then when you get beyond that, then you've gotta deal with all the countries it shares borders with.

And a lot of them are unstable, and a lot of them are hostile towards China and some of them are US allies or partners, and they're in a really, really tough neighborhood. And meanwhile, the US is, You know, pretty much blessed by geography. They don't really face any serious threats from a neighbor. It doesn't have to worry about its own region in the same way China does. So I think Chinese leaders are intensely focused on that more than anything. And when we bring that to the Middle East and you say their language about security isn't really sufficient. I mean, the thing we keep hearing is peace through development. Right? Look at how China's gone from a weak, underdeveloped country with a lot of security threats, And it's become a very prosperous and stable country, and that was largely due to economic issues, you know, or economic solutions.

And you keep hearing that when they talk about the Middle East. You know, if you address the underdevelopment, you address the attraction of Non state actors or political terrorists or whatever. And that's been the prescription for what When China talks to Middle East leaders about security, they said we're going to help you with development. And, of course, in a region that is desperate for FDI and desperate for development and desperate for more trades, then great. That sounds wonderful. But then you see this Hamas attack on Israel, and, You know, you realize that just doesn't solve the problem. You need more than just peace through development. You actually need more of it.

And I think China's pretty ill equipped for that right now. So I think the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East has really shown us just how They don't really have the solution that people need right now.

Kerry Brown:

I mean, the meeting we met at in Doha last year, was a bit of a revelation to me because I could feel that a lot of the audience from different Middle Eastern countries that were present, you know, have A solid interest in China. I mean, they obviously regard it as a big opportunity and, maybe too much of an opportunity. I mean, I think I really wonder whether they're not gonna be a bit disappointed with what China's gonna deliver in the end. But I also could see that, culturally, I I I think that there's nothing but difference. You know? I mean, this is the problem. It's like I don't think China is economically or militarily as big an issue For, Europe and America culturally. I mean, it's a cultural challenge. And for the Middle East, I think that's, you know, even more so.

Kerry Brown:

Don't think you were present. One of the discussions in the meeting, a colleague from China was asked about, You know, the Weibo issue in Xinjiang. And, I mean, her comment was something about the, You know, the Muslim minority in China. I think her words were troublesome. And, I mean, this was It seemed to me to show an extraordinary kind of cognitive dissonance. Right? I mean, you know, that there was this, very bland language of, oh, we're gonna cooperate and it'll all be fine. But on the other hand, there's also a sort of Very, very big cultural kind of dissimilarity. I mean, I think the problem for China is obviously It's got to deal with this region because it needs things from it. I mean, it definitely needs things from it.

Kerry Brown:

We all know what it needs. I mean, particularly energy but, You know, other raw materials. And it's also interesting the fact that this is a wealthy region now. I mean, you know, it's got wealthy countries there. But I think it's diplomacy. And certainly, it's an attempt to kind of have soft power. It's really, really hard to imagine how it's gonna develop. I mean, it puts a lot of effort into understanding America and Europe. I mean, I think I'll give China credit.

Kerry Brown:

It has tried to. But I think China has not done a huge amount on trying to understand, For instance, the Middle East. I don't think it tries to understand India at all. It doesn't really try to understand, You know, Africa and Latin America. I mean, it's very sort of patchy. And so, you really have to wonder, okay, there's this power with Very different values, very different culture, looking for a growing global role, And there's space for it

to have that global role. It's opening up. But it doesn't really have the message to get people on side.

Kerry Brown:

No one's really kind of rooting for it. You know? I think even those that transactionally work with China, they're doing it, you know, on the basis of, utility, basically, or use. But they're not really on the side of China. I mean, you know, American values did get a lot of people supportive and believing in them and thinking they applied to them and that they were transferable. But, Chinese values are very culturally circumscribed. So this is going to be a very different world where China is more dominant because there's not going to be a kind of shared, You know, sort of idea of cultural kind of commonality. It's gonna be a world where, you know, it's transactional, and we just sort of get on and do what we can, But there's not gonna be much idealism. And so that's gonna be quite a harsh and stark world, I think.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. To the soft power bit, I mean, I've just sent a paper off to an article on China's soft power projection in the Middle East. And it's really interesting because I think there's a tremendous gap. I think, you know, you hear a lot of people talking about China as they respect Our sovereignty, and they do things differently. And there's this sense that China's going to be really valuable. But I think a lot of people are just projecting what they want in China, because it's really a blank page for a lot of folks in the region. They don't know much about it. There's no area studies here where people are learning about Chinese history and culture in Society and and, the language is starting to come into the national curriculums, but this is gonna take a long time to have an impact.

Jonathan Fulton:

Like, China is A big question mark. And the headlines I mean, at that workshop you referred to, or the meeting, we heard a lot of people throwing out these big numbers that keep showing up in headlines. China's investing \$11,000,000,000 in Oman and giving \$400,000,000,000 to Iran. And this stuff's all been debunked, but it was in a headline once, and people have just kind of absorbed that, and that's what they know about China. They come in and they address our problems, and they give us a lot. But if you ask this follow-up question, You know, like, what can you tell us about China's strategic culture, China's history, China's involvement in the region, China's Uighur situation? You don't really get a lot of depth. So it does have a hard time. In terms of the soft power, like, I remember moving here.

Jonathan Fulton:

I lived in South Korea before I came to the UAE, And I was really surprised to learn that my time in Korea would be so valuable here, because my students were obsessed with it. You know? They love Korean pop music and its dramas and all this stuff. They love manga and anime from Japan. They love Bollywood movies from India. They love the dramas from Turkey. China's got almost no impact on those cultural products, and people just aren't really consuming stuff about China. The food, the pop culture, the hip hop songs about Xi Jinping, or the, you know, Belt and Road for, initiative, that doesn't translate inside a Marxist Leninist. Now, I think that's a problem they have.

Jonathan Fulton:

A lot of their cultural products are designed for a very specific domestic audience, and it just doesn't travel very well. And here it seems, you know, kind of incomprehensible for folks.

Kerry Brown:

Yes. I mean, I think, they're very envious of South Korea and the, You know, enormous impact that their television, their films, I mean, their just their general kind of image. People really like, You know, South Korean food, they like their products. They like their cultural products, you know, particularly their films. And I I I guess, You know, China is the great kind of potential has never really been fulfilled culturally, I suppose, that, you know, When you look at Chinese New Year or Lunar New Year as some people call it now, that's a festival of, I suppose, partly of of Chinese culture, you know, and everywhere you go, in in Europe, you know, London, Sydney, San Francisco, you know, these big festivals. In a sense, that shows you what kind of reach Chinese culture broadly can have. I mean, people are interested and attracted by the cuisine, by the, you know, kind of the kung fu, by all of this sort of paraphernalia, and yet, The image of China as a country because of its political system, continues to be challenging and confronting. I mean, this is, you know, something that I find strange that, you know, people say that China is trying to influence and, You know, change public opinion and have an impact.

Kerry Brown:

I mean, I think the problem is not that it's trying to influence public opinion in covert ways. I think that it's really not possible. I mean, even when it's got a case to make, I mean, I think there's some sometimes, believe it or not, China's got a reason for believing and doing the things it wants to do. And when it makes this case, of course, Almost every time, it gets a very rough reception, in the kind of outside world, particularly in the media. And I kind of feel that that's as much of a problem as, you know, the fact that within its own domestic media, it's always so positive and everything's great. Within, you know, a lot of foreign media about China, everything is

always so terrible. I mean, there's no balance. And so it's been very frustrating in the last 3 or 4 years to kind of try and see, okay, where Can you get a kind of more neutral view of China? Which is, you know, admitting that there are big problems, but also That it's not this bastion of evil that I think, you know, sometimes it's made out to be.

Kerry Brown:

It's, you know, it's problematic, but I don't think it's existentially evil. But it's very difficult to get that kind of balance in a lot of Western discourse. And I think It's not helped by the fact that, you know, in some areas like in the Middle East, China is accepted sometimes on its own terms, at least publicly. And yet I mean, there's clearly very big reservations about what China means, for people. I mean, you know, culturally, in terms of its Politics, I think, in the Middle East, there are certainly people who must have big reservations about what China is doing to its Muslims, for instance. I mean, it must be a very big problem, But it's outspoken. I think that's just, you know, kind of going to be more and more difficult as we go forward to get An accurate understanding of what China is because it's either way too positive or way too negative, and neither are particularly truthful.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yep. I couldn't agree more. You know, when I think about China's presence here, It's it's it can be a tremendously important actor, you know, in what it can offer technologically and economically. This is really needed in the region. They need countries that have that kind of experience that can do it. And, it's gotten to the point where it's hard to imagine working out very easily, because there really is kind of this, I don't know, like a bifurcation, it seems that, you know, you've gotta pick. And I've said this so many times, if you look just neutrally at what, say, you know, the West writ large, what the West's Interests in the Middle East are and what China's interests in the Middle East are, they line up really neatly. And you can see a situation where in a different political environment, there could be some kind of coordination on policy to to really help the region quite a lot, rather than looking at it as its own competition.

Jonathan Fulton:

And so hopefully, things politically change. Although, as you said earlier on in the show, with all these elections coming up this year, there's a chance that folks are gonna use politics to do all sorts of, address all sorts of their own domestic issues, and maybe not help out on things in the foreign policy front too much.

Kerry Brown:

Indeed. It's gonna be quite a year. It's gonna be quite a year. We're gonna have to hold on by the seat of our pants,

Jonathan Fulton:

I think. It's, Yep. Yep. We're 24 days in. It already feels like it's been a year. Indeed. Look, Kerry, I can't thank you enough. I really enjoyed this conversation.

Jonathan Fulton:

I'm sure our listeners will too. It's really useful. Just, what are you working on now? Would you have a book on its way?

Kerry Brown:

Well, I have 2, actually. 1, a history of Britain's relations with China from 15/70, which is gonna come out with Yale in August. It's never been written before, a comprehensive history of Britain's relations with China. And so I just wanted to give British people their China story, basically, because the Chinese know their story about us, but we don't know it back. And I enjoyed writing that a lot. And then a more polemical book about Taiwan for Penguin, just about, you know, scenarios, what might happen. And my conclusion is the less that happens, the better. Mhmm.

Kerry Brown:

This is an insoluble problem. It's like a kind of ticking time bomb. And I was quite surprised at some American politicians wading in and saying we should recognize Taiwan. I don't think these people know what they're dealing with. Mike Pompeo, for instance, went to Taiwan and said, we need to have an embassy in Taipei. Well, okay. But you gotta get ready to bring the body bags back because this is gonna be inflammatory. So I just hope That this kinda contributes to maybe calming things down a bit and keeping people away from trying to be too adventurous on this issue because it's not soluble at the moment.

Jonathan Fulton:

No. I can't wait to read that. I ran out of university. My thought was I was an African politics guy in my bachelor's degree, and I thought I was gonna do that. And then I went to Taiwan, to teach English as a 22 year old, and that was it. And, I fell in love with the place and can't wait to read this book. Look. Thanks so much for joining us. Really enjoyed it. I'm sure our listeners learned a lot. This is really, really helpful. To our listeners, thanks for joining us. We're going to have another really great show in a couple of weeks, so stay tuned. And, of course, like and rate and