

In this episode, our host Jonathan Fulton and guests [Li-Chen Sim](#) and [Mark Katz](#) explore the growing collaboration between China and Russia and its impact on the Middle East, including the amplification of influence through media collaboration as a force multiplier. We unravel the complexities of Sino-Russian engagement in the region, discussing Russia's interests, China's role, the Ukraine war's influence, and the Middle East perspective: Russia as a muscle and weapon supplier versus China as a financial power. Join us as we navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape of this crucial region.

Takeaways

- Chinese-Russian Collaboration in the Middle East
- China's Activities and Interests in the Middle East
- Perceptions of Great Power Competition and Influence in the Middle East

Quotes

"There is room for negotiation and cooperation between the US and China, transcending any cold war-like conflict." - Mark Katz

"Together, as a force multiplier, they amplify their interests and narratives in the Middle East, projecting greater collective power and influence."- Dr. Li-Chen Sim

Featured in the Episode

Dr. Li-Chen Sim

Political Scientist At Khalifa University Abu Dhabi United Arab Emirates

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/li-chen-sim-3098035a/>

Mark Katz

Professor of Government and Politics, George Mason University--Schar School of Policy and Government

Linkedin: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mark-n-katz-0707b213/>

Jonathan Fulton

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

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

<https://twitter.com/jonathandfulton>

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Transcript:

Jonathan Fulton:

Welcome to the China MENA podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlanta Council, and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. In this episode, we're going to broaden the scope and add Russia to the mix. The US Department of Defense has identified China and Russia as its two primary threats. And over the past few years, we've seen Beijing and Moscow working much more closely on a wide range of bilateral issues. They're also using multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, and an effort to reshape global order. This has implications for the Middle East, where both China and Russia have emerged as important next regional powers. In October of this year, Russia's deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov said that the 2 countries are coordinating their Middle East policies, making for an even more complex regional landscape.

Jonathan Fulton:

To help us understand what Russia's up to in the Middle East and how China fits in, I've got 2 great guests, Mark Katz and Lee Chan Sim. Mark is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University, and is also a nonresident senior fellow at The Atlantic Council, he writes mainly on Russian foreign and security policy, especially towards the Middle East. Li Chen is a political scientist at Khalifa University Abu Dhabi United United Arab Emirates. She's also a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute. She's a specialist in the political economy of Russian and China, Russian and golf energy, and its intersection with international relations. Mark, Li Chen, welcome to the show.

Mark Katz:

Thanks for having us.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Wanted to have you 2 on for a long time. As you know, Russia in the Middle East is always an evergreen topic. And when you throw China in, it's it's Everybody wants to talk about it. So, Mark, we'll start with you. Just broadly speaking, what are Russia's interests in the Middle East, and what tools does it use to achieve them?

Mark Katz:

Well, Russia has several interests, I think, in the Middle East. One is that it's an arena in which it can compete, within the United States and its ongoing competition. And it's one in which it has, I think, you know, several advantages. Some of those advantages, I think, come about because of American foreign policy missteps. Another I think one of their interests is to prevent Jihadism spilling over from the Middle East, into the Muslim regions of, of the Russian Federation and, of course, elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Of course, there are indigenous sources of Jihadism, within these Muslim regions, and the Russians have been pretty good at suppressing them, but they wanna make sure that Russia's Muslim regions don't become like Afghanistan was in the 19 eighties. It caused celebrations for the whole Muslim world. And then I think another interest is simply to advance Russia's economic interests, and certainly, with regard to, it's oil production and cooperation with Saudi Arabia in particular in the OPEC plus format.

Mark Katz:

The Russians also sell a large amount of weaponry to the Middle East, and also they're interested in selling nuclear reactors. There's, you know, Petroleum, weapons, atomic reactors, these are the 3 main exports, plus, of course, grain as well, and the Middle East is a big buyer of grain. So, you know, and some of the tools that they use well, I think, you know, the the main tool is that they Their interests coincide with those of many of the authoritarian governments in the Middle East, which are also, you know, Nervous about, Western, especially American push for democratization and human rights In the past, you know, 1 now, you know, people who are human rights experts would say that America hasn't pushed very hard. But from the point of view of both the Russian government and many Middle Eastern governments, It's pushed way too hard. And, also, I think all these governments are also opposed to Jihadism. And so I think

that, in terms of arms sales as well as, you know, cooperation on oil, cooperation diplomatically over a number of issues Russia has a lot of levers to pursue its interests in the region.

Jonathan Fulton:

Oh, that's great. That's a really great overview. Li Chen, last year, you and I published a report for the Atlantic Council looking at China and Russia, in the Middle East. Do you see their interest in the region converging, diverging, or somewhere in between? Are there Countries or sectors where they support each other, or where they're more competitive with each other?

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Well, I think it's a great question. In terms of convergence, you know, you noted the statement that, you know, we are going to coordinate and cooperate more closely on Middle East issues. And that is something that they have indicated repeatedly, you know. They signed the joint statements, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, Saying that they want peace and stability in the Middle East. So there's a lot of these noises about convergence, And indeed, we do see some examples of convergence. For example, they both support alternative Trade routes to Europe that go through the Middle East, for example. Of course, the reason for that is that these trade routes are seen to be, possibly, sanctions proof or at least they can bust some of the sanctions that the US are putting on Russia and that they could possibly put on China as well. So they do converge on these, alternative, trade routes to Europe.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Where I see that they converge as well is, diplomatically, around the world. For example, you have, widening the membership of the Shanghai cooperation to some of the Middle Eastern countries, And this would be, you know, in a kind of potential competition, let's say, to the OSCE, European US led order. Another example is in the banks. So they've set up the new development bank under the bricks. As well as the Asian infrastructure bank, you have some Middle East members in there. Those are led by China and Russia. And again, you know, that is, a counterpart to say the more US and European led IMF, as well as the World Bank and EBRD. The, where they converge as well is also probably in moving away from using the dollar, in in trades, between the Middle East and China and Russia, so that there are some examples of Middle Eastern countries using the yuan to settle some of their trades. So I think this is

where they converge in trying to De Dollarize or at least move more payments out of the dollar, into another currency, in this case, the yuan.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Again, Thinking of, like, sanctions busting, methodology. But I think they don't always converge, And whether they diverge or whether they are somewhere in between, I think a good example is the Hamas Israel war, Where they seem to converge because they both vetoed a US draft resolution that emphasized Israel's right to self defense. Obviously, they have both pushed for a ceasefire declaration because they both know that the US will oppose this. So they do converge in this kind of a diplomatic push, to make, you know, the US look pretty bad, in the Middle East and around the world. But I think, generally, they are somewhere in between, in terms of the Middle East, in some areas. For example, China is more a status quo power with regards to the US presence in the Middle East. Whereas and it's not quite so Happy sometimes to some of the Russian actions, which tend to destabilize the Middle East. After all, China is an oil importer.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

It's got Important trade and investments here. But so do they divert here? I think it's worth watching, particularly since China has introduced its Global security initiative last year that takes into account more security based threats or interests or responses to the Middle East And worldwide. So I think, it is more interesting now in peace and sec in using security measures to try to calm some of the conflicts instead of just using development measures. So this could, you know, be also another form of convergence with the The Russian approach of a more security led approach, but, time will tell, Jonathan.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. There's a lot of good stuff in there. I just wanna follow-up like I mentioned when I asked you the question. We wrote this report last year, and we'll put a link to it on the show page. One of the concepts that we wrote about was Russia and China's force multipliers in the Middle East. And I think it's interesting because what you're bringing up, you know, is that, you know, China's more Leaning a little more to the status quo because of its economic interest, because of its large expatriate population, because of its energy needs. Russia, you know, has proven to be less willing to pursue the status quo in the region. You know, support for Syria and working with Iran, puts it at odds sometimes with more status quo into countries.

Jonathan Fulton:

What is it about these 2 countries working together that results in this force multiplier dynamic?

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Well, so forced multiplier, let me just define what you and I meant in this report. Force multiplier is whereby they can reinforce, not just reinforce, but strengthen each other's interests and narratives in the Middle East and make them together seem more powerful or influential than they are individually. Right. So they are multiplying their effect, in the Middle East on both, the Middle Eastern actors as well, let's say, on US perception of their influence in the Middle East. So an example of it would be in the media. So in the media, sometimes, we see that Russia and China echo each other's statements or even cartoons or even Twitter or social media posts, both in the, English language version of Russian sites, in the Middle East, like RT and Sputnik, and China does the same thing with its, you know, English language, Arabic language, sorry, sites in the Middle East. They sometimes echo the Russian positions or take material from The Russian media. So it kind of, again, you know, reinforces or or gives the image, you know, that this is not just from China, but it's from Russia as well.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

This is how, you know, this is what the world looks like. This is what you're doing. It's not just China saying this, but Russia is saying this. So it just Adds, to that volume of noise about, what China, Russia, and the US are doing in the Middle East, Particularly, you know, just, trying to say that the US is not to be trusted, the US doesn't stick with its friends, So this just amplifies the volume about views about the US. But it's not just about the media. I think in terms of security, they've also had, like, joint military drills with Iran. This was back in March 2023, in the Gulf of Oman. So this again adds to the impression that, you know, it's not just China who is more militarily active in the Middle East, Russia is as well.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

We see that in terms of drone sales, you have the Chinese selling the Taihang drones to Saudi Arabia, you have them selling Wing Loong drones to the UAE. And I think this kind of complements the more, like the anti ballistic missiles that Russia sells, or has sold is selling to Iran, Turkey and Syria, their s 3 hundreds and s 4 hundreds. So it's

kind of like a teamwork effort. Right? You sell this and the Chinese say, we will sell that. And that kind of amplifies against the, you know, the idea that the US is losing ground in terms of its weapon sales here, and the Chinese and the Russians are gaining ground. So it's this kind of, force by effect. And I think that's what we meant in the report. Also, I can give an example of, say, diplomatically, they both had numerous bilateral and multilateral visits as you've mentioned in your introduction.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Most recently, for example, UAE was the guest of Honor, in mid 23 in the Saint Petersburg economic forum. China helped the GCC China forum in 2023. So again, this gives the impression that the region is somehow tilting away diplomatically from the US towards other actors, in this case, Towards China and Russia, which are the, you know, pacing and long term competitors, to the US as you mentioned.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. That's interesting. You know, I was doing a project, throughout the region, in late 23 or sorry, late 22 and early 23. And I traveled around the Middle East quite a bit. And one of the recurring messages that we kept hearing was that, You know, Russia's the muscle and China's the money. And I think most people in the countries we visited had pretty realistic assessments of Both countries power and influence in the region, but that they saw these 2 having these complementary Factors that they brought to the table, you know, they they they recognize the limitations of what they could do, but when they saw them as this, you know, money and power coming in together, they thought it was pretty impressive. Mark, you've done a lot of great stuff on Russia and Iran, so, of course, I wanna talk about this Trilateral, Lee Chen mentioned the naval drills. There were other ones in 2019.

Jonathan Fulton:

It gets a lot of people's attention. This idea of, you know, the so -called triple axis of Russia, China and Iran. Mark Milley, the chairman of the joint chief of staff, had said that the 3 would be a problem for the US for years. Do you see this as an alignment that has a potential to alter the strategic landscape in the Middle East? Are there important areas of cooperation? Or is this an access of convenience?

Mark Katz:

I think it's more an access to convenience. And I think that, more than that, The perception arises that US power and influence is declining. I think we'll see more divergence, among the The Axis partners. And I think already, there is some reason for Russia to be jealous of China. Because after all, when Iran and Saudi Arabia were looking for a mediator in terms of restoring diplomatic relations. Whom do they turn to? They turn to China, not Russia. And recently, I think we've seen that, you know, it was, you know that, I think Saudi leader, you know, and I think, Iranian leader Our our diplomats went to China with regard to the Hamas, Israel conflict, not so much Russia. In other words, there seems to be a sense in the Middle East that China is the alternative to the US in terms of Conflict resolution and not Russia.

Mark Katz:

And Russia has long advertised itself as the, The, the preferred alternative to the United States as a conflict resolution partner. So I think that, you know, we do see some beginnings. Also, you know, you know, Lee Chen mentioned the, you know, complimentary weapon sales. But one of the things we need to mention is, of course, the impact of the war in Ukraine, And this has limited Russia's ability to export weapons to some extent. In fact, we've seen that the Russians have actually bought back weapon systems both from Myanmar and from India. Now, obviously, there was a recent sale to Iran, the s 30 fives. In particular, these were supposed to have gone to Egypt. You know, under US pressure, the Egyptians canceled out, and so they finally went to Iran, but it took quite a long time. And I think that the Russians are in a position where they need all the weapons that they can produce for sale, and can they produce them as successfully as before because of the sanctions? So I think that The longer this war goes on, in fact, China's influence May increase not because of anything that China is necessarily doing, but because the government sees China as a more reliable supplier in many respects than Russia.

Mark Katz:

And, of course, there's also the little matter that China is a petroleum importer. Russia's petroleum exporter is competing, you know, with these Gulf States. And even though we have cooperation in the OPEC plus format, Essentially, you know, Russian oil is sold at a discount. This is, eating into, what the, you know, the Gulf producers could earn, that they have to take this into account. The people who can and will buy this Cheaper oil, obviously. So I think that, in many respects, that While many in the gulf in particular may not see the US as as strong a partner as they may have hoped, I think that what this war has pointed out is that maybe Russia isn't as reliable either. In other words, there's only so much Russia can do, and hence, We see the attempt to draw China in.

And I think that's also, I think, one of the important things is part of the reason why external great powers are influential in this part of the world is because there's a demand in this part of the world for great power patronage.

Mark Katz:

And so I think that, you know, that There's a there is a demand for greater Chinese activity. I may be more interested than the Chinese at the moment. But I think there's a sense that, There's only so much that Russia can do at this point because of this war.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. I think the conflict in Gaza also changes that dynamic a bit too, because I think the limits of what China can offer have been Made quite clear to a lot of countries in the region where it doesn't really have the power to convene or to shape events on the ground. It's not really the power on this that people were hoping for, and I think a lot of countries or leaders in the region look at the US response and how the US has backed up Israel. And they might not like it, but I think they like the idea of it. To think, like, if we could get that kind of relationship with the US, if we could get those kinds of security commitments, you know, kind of like how people looked at Russia and Syria. That was something I heard a lot in the Gulf. Right? Saying, I don't like what he's doing, but I love how he does it. And I think the same seems to be apparent right now.

Jonathan Fulton:

I think the limits, like you said, the limits of what Russia can offer to a lot of countries in the region have been exposed, and I think the limits of what China is willing to have have also been pretty exposed. I kind of agree with you on the access to convenience idea. Like, I think there's a narrative affinity that Russia, Iran, and China All agree that they don't like liberal international values and norms, and they'd like to see this changed. But beyond that, I don't really know that there's a lot of, you know, Coordination to try to offer some alternatives. I think they're kind of like a negative power at this point. Just saying what they don't like rather than offering something different.

Mark Katz:

Right. And I think for the Iranians, I mean, the frustrating thing about both Russia and China is that both Russia and China insist on having good relations with Iran's adversaries in the Yeah. You know, including the Gulf Arabs, but also including Israel.

In other words, despite whatever criticism that Russia and China have made. It seems that, you know, cooperation continues. So Russia and China are not doing anything actively to harm what Israel is, you know, trying to achieve in Gaza.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. And then just going back to what you're saying about the discounted oil, I think the same dynamic for Ron, where China you know, like you said, Lee Chen has been using a lot of, of tools to to buy, You know, using teapot refineries that aren't connected to to SWIFT so they can buy a lot of discounted Iranian oil, often using bartering systems to do this. You know, it's great for China. I don't know if it's that great for Iran where they end up getting often, you know, sub quality products in return for this stuff. It kinda builds in a lot of the resentments and kinda feeds that vulnerability, but I wanted to go to the energy side. I'm glad you brought up Mark, because Lee Chen is somebody who usually asks me questions about energy and I can't answer beyond, you know, a couple of minutes. And they ask questions about Russia, and it's the same thing. So It was great when Lee Chen and I worked in the same department.

Jonathan Fulton:

I could just, you know, shout down the hall. Hey, Lee Chen. Can you explain this thing about energy to me? So I'm gonna do that now. On the energy side of things, like Mark alluded to, there's buyer-seller dynamic when we think of Russia and the Chinese engagement region. Obviously, China's, You know, the biggest importer of crude, it's becoming a huge market for LNG. Russia, of course, is, you know, a competitor with a lot of gulf and Middle East buyers. So does this create opportunities for cooperation in the bilateral between Russia and China in this region, or is it a possible point of friction?

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Well, I think for now, there's more opportunities for cooperation, especially in oil. Because as Mark mentioned, yes, Russia is selling more Discounted oil to China, which China is happy to, you know, lap up. But at the same time, China is not really reducing The amount of oil it purchases from, say, the Saudis. Right? It is, you know, decreasing the amount of purchases from other suppliers, maybe, for example, in West Africa, but not really from the Saudis. In fact, the latest data shows that both its volumes from Russia and the Saudis are increasing, but obviously, it's increasing much more in the case of Russia. Now the question is, how can China, with its economy slowing down, be buying so much oil, from both these countries, and the answer is storage. Right? So China has A lot of storage, you know, the strategic petroleum reserves. It has a lot.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

It is building more, and So quite a lot of the oil is going to these tanks. So, you know, it may not necessarily be consuming everything that it buys, but Like, part of it is going to the tanks, you know, for a rainy day, for conflicts, or whatever, so it can draw upon these reserves. So in that sense, China is quite, I guess, happy that Russia is not always fulfilling its quarters in OPEC. Right? I mean, it's supposed to be cutting its quarters, but the Data shows that it's not cutting by as much as it should, technically according to the quotas. So I think China is quite happy in that sense that it is, you know, kind of lukewarm about upholding the quotas. That's good news for China because it means that there is more oil than OPEC would expect, on the market and a handset, decreasing prices. So I think that's cooperation or at least it's a kind of a fringe benefit for China in that sense, in the Middle East, when it is in the form of OPEC plus, we've always had other Middle Eastern friends. But also but in terms of LNG though, does China want to is there an opportunity for China to import more Russian gas, More Russian LNG, now that, Russia does not want to send, the same amount of gas through the pipeline, And there are moves by Europe to actually sanction or actually block imports of Russian LNG.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Is that an opportunity for China? Well, it's not really an opportunity because there are no direct pipelines that can take away the gas meant for Europe to come to Asia. There is no pipeline that can go to the same fuse which is supplying Europe with the Russian gas. So they actually have to build a new pipeline that can do that directly to China. And at the moment, they are negotiating on this pipeline that can redirect some of the Europe European bound gas to China. But at the moment, China is holding out because it knows the longer it holds out, the better view it could get because Russia could get more desperate. Right? I mean, no one ever said it was easy negotiating with the Chinese. It wasn't difficult. It was very difficult with the power of the Siberia one, the first, Russia China pipeline.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

It's gonna be even more difficult now that Russia has no other options. It's financially constrained, etcetera. And believe you me, I'm Chinese myself. I mean, Chinese ethnicity. I know what a hard bargain the Chinese can drive, so that's gonna be difficult. But I think in terms of other areas of energy, there could be some competition in terms of, say, nuclear reactor exports. Russia already has a big market for that. And, Mark,

you mentioned that they have lots of projects going on in the Middle East and, of course, in other parts of the world.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

China doesn't have any Middle East projects at the moment. It does have some experience of its reactors overseas, not a lot, not as much as Russia, but I think where the competition will come in will be when China actually commercializes its small modular reactors, something that Russia hasn't had much opportunity to do because it's been focused on its, you know, traditional huge Reactors, now, of course, gonna be financially constrained, etcetera. It's gonna be constrained in terms of technology because some parts of the process were imported from, you know, foreign suppliers. So, I think this is where in terms of SMR, the smaller nuclear if China's pouring a lot of money into that, and I think that could interest quite a lot of Middle Eastern countries, you know, who put 1 smaller, reactors that are cheaper, that are faster to build, etcetera.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. You, for you, you saw my question coming because that's something that China's been focusing on, trying to promote itself as a provider of nuclear energy in the region. And I was going to ask you if you thought that they had much of an advantage in trying to do this. You know, obviously, a lot of folks were looking to the Saudis not too long ago as they've been saying they want a commercial nuclear reactor, and that there's a thought that China might step in. What do you think? Do you think China's got a shot at this?

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Well, I think they've already put in a bid for it. Right? So, I think the French have a bid. The Koreans have a bid. The Chinese have a bid in. So the Saudis are right now, you know, looking at all the proposals. I don't really think the Chinese one will have a shot at it. It came in late. Right? The Chinese bid came in pretty late.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

I don't think that I think realistically, they probably my guess is go for the Korean bid. But, you know, let's see whether, You know, it it's all complicated with the 1, 2, 3 agreements, with the US because part of the Korean technology is, you know, licensed from the US, Which means that the Saudis would have to be bound by a 1, 2, 3, that the

US nuclear cooperation agreements They have a lot of restrictions, so we'll see whether the Saudis are actually willing to do that. But so far, you know, the Koreans, they have the experience in the UAE, obviously, and they have a good domestic nuclear reactor program. So I think they have quite a lot of advantages, but, you know, who knows? Someone can pull a rabbit out of a hat. And, energy choices, especially nuclear, is Always a political decision as we saw in the UAE as well. It was tied to other things. So it won't it won't be surprising if it's also a political decision that Saudi Arabia takes, and they could surprise everyone.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. I'm with you. I think that the Koreans have an advantage on this one for sure, just because it's politically so much easier, but, yeah, time will tell. Mark, You've been talking with people in the region about Russia for four years now. You've got a really interesting network of people around here that have been thinking about it. Just wondering, you know, like, we've seen Russia become a bigger actor again, you know, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and that was the idea of Russia. It's not a big A big deal here anymore, and then suddenly it became a big deal again. What when you talk to people from the Middle East about this, what kind of You know, how do they see Russia's reemergence into the region? Is this something that people are, you know, wary of, excited about? Do you know what people think about Russia as an actor here?

Mark Katz:

You know, I think that actually people in the Middle East are happy for Russia to play this role. And I remember back in the 19 nineties that the Middle Easterners were really disappointed that the Russians had left, for going to a conference, back when one could still do so in Sana'a in, Yemen. I think it was 1992, and it was about, essentially, you know, Yemen navigating the, you know, the collapse of the Soviet Union. And to me, what was shocking was just That their real emotional disappointment and, and and anger that the Russians were no longer there to help the Yemenis Because after all, what else was their point in life? And that now, I think that what we see is that, that there is a degree of happiness. Certainly, what I think was interesting is that during the Cold War, we saw Soviet influence increase in some countries. It's made others nervous. To me, what was amazing about the Russian intervention in Syria, beginning in 2015 was that other countries didn't seem to really feel threatened. Of course, you have a number of Russian armed forces coming into the Middle East, and this was not seen as a threat to neighboring countries at all.

Mark Katz:

And I think that partly, you know, this is because the preference, I think, in the Middle East is to have competing external great powers, to navigate between. They didn't like the idea, at least the perception of an American dominated Unipolar world order. I don't think the US actually was particularly dominant, but that was certainly the impression That there was only 1 great power and that one had to respond to its demands, whether one liked it or not, and they often did not. Certainly, the Bush George w Bush administration is calling for democratization in the Greater Middle East. And so I think having Russia As an active competitor in the region is something that they like. And I think that they're happy to have China as well. I think there's even those who'd like to see India play such a role that that's what gives the local actors leverage. In other words, that they can, you know, especially in and even in the United States.

Mark Katz:

In other words, if they're worried that the United States is leaving, I don't think it is. But if this is what they're worried about, what they know is that the US feels threatened by Russia. Therefore, flirting with Russia is a great way to get America's attention, isn't it? And so I think that that's and they're not above doing this. And so, I think that in general that there is, that there's happen in fact, I think the real fear, at least, for a while, it was that Russia might have actually been defeated in Ukraine, and then the older situation What would reemerge, in which the US was a predominant power, and China was not yet, as interested to play as big a political military role as it is an economic role. So I think that, you know, this is partly why we see the diffidence in the Middle East. With regard to the war in Ukraine, it's not that they really support Russia's activities in Ukraine, but they don't want to see Russia lose. And that's Too bad about Ukraine, but they have their own interest to think about.

Jonathan Fulton:

Mhmm. It's been interesting as great power competition, you know, drives a lot of US foreign policy. The Indo Pacific is a priority theater. You know, there's this idea, I think, for a lot of folks that the Middle East is is well, at least before October 7th, there was an idea that the Middle East is kind of less relevant to, You know, policy community and think tanks and, you

Mark Katz:

know, unless I never quite understood this. I guess, partly because I grew up during the Cold War. Right. The Soviet American competition was a worldwide competition. It was

a competition in each and every region of the world. So if there is going to be this overarching Chinese American competition, it will also be a competition in every region of the world. Certainly, China is active in the Middle East. It's active in Africa.

Mark Katz:

It's active in Latin America. And so, you know, I would have thought that the, you know, the governments in the region We recognize this. There is something oh, yes. This is something very similar to what we had during the Cold War because, it seems to me that, If anything, a Chinese American competition will guarantee that the US is interested in the Middle East, just as the Russian American competition has done so. So, yeah, I don't see I don't see American interest in this region declining.

Jonathan Fulton:

No. I agree. But I I was just gonna say that a lot of the times when people say the Middle East is it we're not focusing on Middle East projects the way we used to. But if you could say, We've got a China Russia project. You know, China, Russia are in the Middle East, and then people get interested

Mark Katz:

in it.

Jonathan Fulton:

So yeah. I think its business is good for the stuff the 3 of us work on.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Can I just jump in here and just say that, Mark, I I completely agree with you? The gulf states don't wanna see Russia losing, you know, in this in the Russia Ukraine war, but also China doesn't want Russia to lose. Right? It's just not in China's interest to see Russia losing, partly because of the force multiplier effect that we talked about. If you have 1 partner less or less powerful than, you know, by extension, then China becomes, you know, its influence dwindles a little bit because you don't have that augmented influence. So it's not Just the Gulf states by China as well. And, yeah. And it's not just, I suppose, China, you know, the Gulf states floating with Russia. They're also flirting with China, to use your analogy, In order to get the US to be interested.

Mark Katz:

Right. Yeah. I guess it's a little more than flirting, but we need to go into that Technology.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Well, I think there have been a couple of points where Beijing's been I wouldn't say lucky. That's a little too cynical. But you think of, you know, when George W Bush was running for president, and it was all about China. And September 11th happened, and I think a lot of folks took their eye off the ball, Of course, and focused on the Middle East. And then, you know, when it the, you know, Pacific becomes starting to become actualized, and then the war in Ukraine starts and everybody kind Refolces again. So, you know, it's given China a little bit of breathing space. And I think I agree, Lee Chen.

Jonathan Fulton:

I think for Beijing, The idea of Russia losing would be a nightmare situation. Liqian, I want to ask you, you've been in the Gulf for quite a while. How do you think folks here, you know, whether it's mostly, I guess, the policy community, people in different governments. How should they be thinking about, you know, greater Russian and Chinese involvement in the Middle East, in the Gulf.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Well, I think I've got 2 points to make here. So 1, I think that They should sometimes see the declarations that China and Russia make or some of the engagements that they make with the gout states or with the Middle Eastern states. As a kind of signaling, it plays a signaling game. I don't think it really has, You know, too much substance in it, but it's there to signal something or to, you know, to gain American attention, as Mark mentioned. So one example is drones. Right? The Americans didn't want to sell their, you know, their high altitude high altitude Altitude drones to the Gulf states, for many years, and so the Gulf states went to China, to buy, you know, different kinds of drones, Saudi China, and so did the UAE. And they've got their drones, But they still want the really high-tech reefer drones because it's its high altitude. You can see more things.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

It's more for surveillance, You know, harder to shoot down that kind of thing. But, you know, Qatar did get US drones, but these were, you know, not at the level of the

drones, there were others. And the UAE is still negotiating for drones. But again, I think that sometimes when you buy these weapons from other countries, it kind of tells Your target. Right? Your main target. Hey. Look. I have options even if you don't sell me your, like, super sophisticated drones like options.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

So maybe you should think about sending me your drones because if not, I'll go for others. Right? So I think sometimes some of these things are signaling functions just like the S 400, which the Saudis were set to be interested in purchasing from the US. Well, now apparently, of, so the S 400 from The Russians. But apparently, now they're not going to do it, now that they're negotiating, you know, maybe a closer relationship with the US with, You know, certain security guarantees, etcetera. This now seems to be off the table. So this is the signaling function I mentioned that sometimes The policy community here, especially from the US, tends to jump, when they see some of these interactions. Right? I guess I'm a bit worried, but I think they should sometimes take these with a grain of salt or a huge grain of salt. The second point I wanted to make was that, I think the US, if it wants to counter some of these moves, should think about not going it alone.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Sometimes the US tends to want to just go it alone and say, okay. To counter the US or to counter China or Russia, we're gonna do this. But I think we have to sort of think in terms of cooperating with the allies. Right? They have strong allies. In the Japanese And in the Koreans, for example, these 2 have very, very good relations with Gulf states. So I think the US should actually use, You know, there are good relations with China and and, with Japan and Korea to actually counter, you know, some of these Chinese moves because the Chinese themselves are actually cooperating sometimes with Japanese and the Koreans. One good example is in the Saudi refinery, in Rabi itself. It was Built by the Chinese, but the financing part of it was from the Japanese.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

And so it was despite competition between the East Asian states. They do cooperate in In areas in the energy sector, not just in petrochemicals, but in renewables where you do see the Japanese financing Chinese built projects in the gulf. Right? So I think that the US could take a leave from that and also cooperate, you know, with the Japanese or with the Koreans in the Middle East. You know, it's not just them who have to go it alone, the US. So I'd actually like to see more of these collaborations.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Yeah. Here here. I talk about this one all the time. You know, there was that meeting in Washington earlier this fall with leaders from Japan, Korea, and and and the US, working on more strategic affairs across the Indo Pacific, and I think this is a region where all 3 have really deep and important interests. You've seen, the Japanese prime minister Kishida was here in the summer. Foreign minister was here, I believe in September. You know, there's a lot of A lot of big stuff happening.

Jonathan Fulton:

It it's been interesting because Japan, I think, has typically been seen as more of a customer. And you could see from these visits where Japanese leaders were saying, look, we can help you in your energy transition. We can help you on more strategic things. The Koreans have been selling weapons and and made security commitments. So, Yeah. It is a pretty pretty, interesting dynamic. Mark, how about from the view from, the DC metro area? What would you say to, Folks in in the Washington policy community who are thinking about Russia and China in the region.

Mark Katz:

You know, I think that, one of the things that we simply have to accept is that there is going to be cooperation in the region, with China and Russia. I think that, you know, it's not something we can stop, so we shouldn't try to. You know, I I think that, you know, I would, underline what, you know, Lee Chen said about working with Japan and South Korea. Also, I think that one mustn't Forget our European partners, not to mention our Canadian, Australian partners as well. There's lots of people whom we can Whom we can work with. I I do think that, I personally feel that, Ultimately, the US and China, that there doesn't need to be this cold war style conflict between I think that there can be room for negotiation and cooperation. I don't really see Chinese American Competition as necessarily being zero sum. Unlike, I think, between Russia and the United States.

Mark Katz:

In that I think that, you know, in general, you know, China is looking to work with governments. Now, of course, Russia is # 2 in the region, but I think that, you know, this war in Ukraine to the extent that it interrupted, you know, food, supplies and and could do so again. But this has the capacity for really undermining Numerous countries in the Middle East often, you know, poor ones, but, you know, instability in those poor

countries is gonna affect the richer ones as well. So it seems to me that the US and China, and, you know, most of the governments in the Middle East have an interest in stability, something that Russia really doesn't. That Russia really does it benefits from instability or so it says that that's how it sees its interests, under Putin. And so I think that this is something that we ought to think of as well. Maybe China is a better alternative. In other words, if the Middle Eastern countries are willing to cooperate with anyone. Maybe maybe we're better off if they cooperate more with China and less with Russia.

Mark Katz:

Now some might think that that's a naive point of view, but I think that at the moment, I think that that's something that we should be open to. And I think that, ultimately, that, You know, Russia, that that that it's going to, I think, enter it is entering a crisis, it Seems to me, in other words, that I think that, you know, even it's not clear to me that they can win this war, that Putin's gonna pursue it, no matter what but that even if they somehow prevail, if they overrun Ukraine, it's going to be Russia at odds with the West So long as that's the case. And I think that, you know, Middle Eastern countries are gonna have a, I think a hard time I think in other words, if Middle Eastern countries are worried about, you know, are the Americans going to protect us sufficiently? Well, then the real question is, well, Well, who else is? In other words, will Russia be able to do so? I'm not so sure. Is China willing to do so? I'm not so sure. So I think that we have to work with our Middle Eastern partners to understand that they have different interests than we do, But to focus on what our common interests are, because it's simply too important for this, cooperation to cease, it seems to me.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's all great, but I think the headline from this is gonna be professor Katz calls for a Sino Soviet split in the Middle East. Look, guys, I'm so glad you were able to do this. I've been wanting to have the 2 of you on, You've been on my wish list for a long time. I've been wanting to do this show for months now. I'm glad we're able to do this. Thanks for doing it, so close to the holidays. Really appreciate it.

Mark Katz:

Thank you so much for having us. It was great, great seeing, talking with both of you again.

Dr. Li-Chen Sim:

Yeah. And I'm great. I'm glad we made your Christmas wish come true.

Jonathan Fulton:

Thanks. Okay. Well and to the audience, thanks for joining us again. We'll have another episode coming out hopefully in a couple of weeks. Pretty good one lined up. So, you know what to do, like, listen, subscribe, and all that stuff, and we'll see you all soon.