

In this episode of the China-MENA Podcast titled "China's Role and Impact on MENA's Air Domain," host Jonathan Fulton discusses China's influence on the air domain in the Middle East and North Africa with experts [Assaf Heller](#) and [Sarah-Masha Fainberg](#). They explore Chinese technology transfers and arm exports and its implications on the air domain and military capabilities in MENA, Chinese weapon systems, China's military-civil fusion concerns, and Beijing's growing technological influence on the region.

Tune in to gain insights into the implications of China's expanding presence in the region and its effects on military capabilities and hear the experts' forecast on advanced technology and arms transfers by China.

### **Takeaways**

- Presence in the MENA Region
- Implications on the Air Domain and Military Capabilities
- Concerns about Chinese Exports and Technology Transfers
- Chinese Technology Transfers and Impact on the Air Domain
- Understanding China's Presence in the Region

### **Quotes**

"The Chinese influence in the Middle East should not be overlooked. It encompasses both strategic and operational impact, and we must consider it seriously."- Dr. Assaf Heller

"China seeks to restore and preserve its position as a global power through a national rejuvenation journey." - Sarah-Masha Fainberg

### **Featured in the Episode**

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## **Transcript:**

### **Jonathan Fulton:**

Welcome to the ChinaMENA podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayed University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. An underlying theme in nearly every conversation we've had on this program has been security. The Middle East is a highly competitive region And the role of extra regional actress has always been a significant factor. As China's presence here grows, it's natural to think more about what kind of security role we can expect from Beijing. This leads to a lot of speculation, but not always informed or thoughtful analysis. Because of that, I'm happy to have

with us today Colonel doctor Asaf Haller and doctor Sarah Mejia Feinberg. Asaf is director of research at Tel Aviv University's El Ram Air and Space Research Center.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Sarah is senior researcher and head of the great powers research program also at the Al Ram Air and Space Research Center. And she's also an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. Sarah and her colleagues, Tomer Fadlan and Heinz Schwartz, have recently published a research report, China's expanding presence in MENA, future implications for the air domain. In it, they look deeply at how China's presence can affect The regional military operational environment. So we're going to get pretty deep into the security side of things today. Asaf, Sarah, welcome to the show.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

Thank you very much.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

Thank you.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. So Asaf, we'll start with you. Your report focuses on the implications of China's presence in MENA, Focusing specifically on the air domain, what was the impetus for the study?

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

1st, I think it's important to understand what is the mission of our research center, which is not only an academic center, but also aims to Influence decision makers and, assist them by, letting them have the white picture and the future implications of the, academic knowledge. Therefore, our mission is focusing not only on the strategic level but also on the operational level. And, this is why we're heading to this, to this research. For many years, China had a very low influence on what's going on in the Middle East. It had a very low impact on geopolitical issues. It had no military presence. It sold weapons, but the arms sales were usually limited to low quality weapons And to niche markets. If you put aside what happened during the Iran Iraq war, usually, China was not a great supplier of weapons to any country in the Middle East.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

But recently, we see a change, and we foresee that this change is going to continue and expand. 1st, China is involved in political issues. I think the most important, Example is the influence on the Saudi Arabia and Iran agreement recently, which put China in a very important place in the Middle East. 2nd, it seeks military presence in, in Djibouti, in Bab el Mandeb. They look for ports in the gulf in the Persian Gulf. We talked about the Sabahar port, and we saw naval drills recently with Iran and Russia. The third point is, the ability to develop technology in China. For many years, China had the only low level weapons which were locally produced.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

Recently, it developed its own Capabilities and weapon systems highly sophisticated, which can be transferred to other countries. And we see that, in the recent years, in the last decade, China became, I think, the 5th or 6th, supplier to the Middle East. And finally, the growing tension in the Middle East between the superpowers, Between China, the United States, and Russia, if you decide, is given a new dimension to the presence of China As president Biden, put it in his word onwards, there's a global conflict between the democracies and autocracies. As, the stories of Israel and Gaza, Ukraine and China and and Taiwan are only parts of the same old picture. All these points come together to a point where we see a potential for dramatic change in the presence of China in the Middle East. For several perspectives, first, the supply of better weapons, the supplying of better military and use technologies. It's a military presence and, maybe in the future, military cooperation with states in the Middle East. The reason we took, this project, of describing what China is looking for in the Middle East is that we believe that Israel and the Israeli Air Force should take into account all these, Going on, procedures that, might influence the capabilities of Israel, the capabilities of the Israel Air Force to operate Freely in the Middle East, in the next years. We don't think that China is an enemy of Israel, At least not for now.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

And I believe it's not going to be an enemy of Israel, but its influence on the Air domain. Miltrane Air domain might put some limitations and restrictions upon Israeli capabilities. And this is why we took this project on us and decided to analyze. In Israel, it was the 1st project From the of this type to analyze the operational implications of the Chinese presence in the Middle East.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. It's interesting. I think your last point I mean, obviously, you're looking at this from an Israeli perspective, but I think What's happening affects a lot of countries in the region. And it was interesting for me to see this report because I haven't seen too many countries or governments or militaries in the region that have really given at this level of thought or kind of, scenario planning. So I was happy to see it. I know that I talked, Sarah, with you and some of your colleagues, I believe in mid 2022. And just thinking, Asaf, as you listed all of the changes that have happened in the in, You know, over, say, from December 2022 until now, you've really had, you either look, visionary Or are very, very lucky because a lot of stuff has happened to to make your report a lot more, I think, important. Sarah, one of the things I really thought your team did a really good job of in this report is presenting China's strategic interests, in a pretty clear and, You know, analytical way, looking both internationally and within this region.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

So how do you assess China's strategic interest internationally and in the Middle East? And do you see how you see the Middle East affecting China's broader goals for its international policy?

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

Well, Jonathan, this is a conversation we had together when we met, some months ago. When we talk about China's strategic objectives, our challenge was to maintain a balance between

two Prevailing narratives. There is 1 narrative and especially a Washington focused narrative That presents China's strategic horizon as driven by the ambition of challenging or undermining the US hegemony, not only in the Indo Pacific, but globally and including in the Middle East. And side by side, you have a lenient, narrative or moderate view of China That sees its expansion, including its military and security related expansion, As a way to safeguard its expanding economic and commercial interests. So our challenge for Asaf, Tomer, and Haim and me was to really try to strike a balance between those, Clearly opposing and even opposite views of what China is trying to achieve. If we look at the global level, of course, China is embarked on a national rejuvenation journey, that tries to restore and preserve its position as a world power. Of course, China is driven by the need to safeguard its maritime rights and interests, especially in the South China Sea and to maintain a balanced economic growth And support the sustainable development of its country. And those global interests are, go side inside With what we call the PLA goes global, this new ambition of the PLA to become a world class expeditionary force, expeditionary force by the middle of 21st century.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

And, of course, those global objectives do shape China's strategy in the Middle East. China's strategy, and we talked about this, Jonathan, with you, Appears to be mainly driven by energy, interests. We know that half of China's oil imports come from the Middle East and some 25% And it's consumed, all imports. So this is a first and foremost objective. Another one is about, of course, developing growing markets and economic partnerships, especially with the JCC countries, but also with the countries in North Africa, In Egypt and also with Turkey, a third main objective, and I think it's it is an objective that needs to be, connected to China's military expansion in the area is the need to secure the freedom of navigation along MENA's sea lane. It is vital for China to secure the sea lines of communication in the region. Of course, the Strait of Hormuz between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and the Suez Canal and Bab el Mandel above el Mandeb in the Red Sea. And in this context, we've seen an increasing Chinese presence In the west in the Red Sea that is connected to its larger ambition to become The greatest power in Africa, on the African continent, and, of course, the Red Sea is a key gateway to Africa.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

An additional interest is, of course, the ambition of increasing its influence in the Middle East, and gaining diplomatic and political support from as many states as possible. In this regard, China has pursued an everyone's friend policy, including with Iran and Israel and the Gulf States and Iran. This sort of balancing approach enables it to gain as many political and diplomatic dividends as possible. China has tried to fashion itself as a neutral Mediator also in the region. We should add to China's interest, to observe and sometimes control the rise of Islamic Jihad, and that is connected to China's Uyghur problem. We know that before October 7th, China raised grave concern about the rise of Islamic Jihadism in the region. And the final final goal is to really undermine or challenge the US presence in the area by consolidating its alliance with Russia and Iran, but at the same time, Maintaining this challenge under certain thresholds. The idea for China in our view Is to maintain a sufficient US presence to guarantee

the security, stability, and predictability of our region To safeguard China's commercial and economic interests.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

I would like to make a last point, Jonathan. We are in the midst of the Hamas Israel war, and we've seen a change In, China's policy, whether it's a strategic reorientation of China towards Russia and Iran and Israel's enemies are not is yet to be seen, but we've seen a clear official sighting With, Russia, Iran, and the Palestinian cause, we didn't see any condemnation of Hamas. Hamas is not designed as a terror organization, and we've seen China trying to navigate Through the complex web of alliances, it has developed in the Middle East with countries that are both Anti Israel and anti American, like Iran, countries that are pro American and anti Israel, like Saudi Arabia, And countries that are pro American are not openly anti Israeli. So China has tried To navigate through this complex environment since October 7th. In parallel, we've seen the Chinese regime Enabling and sometimes encouraging an unprecedented anti Semitic campaign on social media, which has raised demands in Israel, and Israel feels alienated by China. China in particular has been extremely in the social media, Chinese bloggers have been extremely aggressive Towards, you know, for example, Chinese hostages like Noah Agamani, one of our young hostages that is held by Hamas, and that has received, thousands of thousands of, speech hatred comments, and we've seen this, De facto institutionalized anti Semitic anti Semitic campaign on social media, which has raised concern and raises the question of whether China has reoriented itself, you know, vis a vis Israel and has, He's questioning the former balancing balance the balancing act he tried to preserve in the Middle East.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I think it's interesting. We did a show about, Israeli perspectives about, China's response to October 7th, in November with, with, Gedalia Aftermount. And we talked about this a lot. And I think a lot of China's response is you you brought up that point, about China's approach to the region saying that they're trying to, At those at 1 on on the one hand, trying to wedge regional actors away from create wedges between regional actors and and the US, but at the same time, Realizing that this US security umbrella is really important for China's interest here. So how do you maintain that? And that's a pretty tough needle thread. And I think when China looks at The Israel Palestine conflict. I imagine for decision makers in Beijing where most, you know, there's Very, very, very minuscule, Israeli or Arab representation in China.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

These people don't have any kind of political voice. It's not like in the US, Europe or Canada where we have huge Arab populations and huge Jewish populations that feel very strongly about this issue, making it important to our politics. In China, it's not it's not important. There's no, you know, lobbying group of Arab Muslims or or, you know, Chinese Jews who are going to Beijing and complaining to the government. So I think it becomes a purely geopolitical issue. And they think, look, if they have this kind of narrow vision of the Arab world thinking, You know, all Arab countries have the same perspective on Palestine, which I think is not true. All they have to do is work with Or or give rhetorical support to Palestine and then get all of these Arab

League states to support China internationally like the UN. And then they think, well, Israel's never going to be split from the US, so it doesn't cost us anything.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Right? So I think it's a very, kind of Pure realpolitik approach to an issue. And I think what it's really shown a lot of folks in the region is China's not really that, definitively an actor on the most consequential issues here, which has been kind of interesting, I think, given all the hype we've seen over the past 2 years.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

Yeah. I I just wanna add to this that, as opposed to the European countries, China doesn't have any ethical considerations, you know, when it comes to, bombing the Gaza Strip. And it's a pure, realpolitik position, But at the same time, it has been used for internal purposes. We've seen the Chinese campaign in the informational space. You know, presenting the barbaric Israeli bombings in the Gaza Strip in order to whitewash What, China is doing with the Uyghur community. You know, so this also has an international and a domestic purpose. I also want to add to that, that at the operational level, China didn't do anything. Meaning that it's a very, In a cause free way of gaining support, of consolidating its base in the Arab world, but with no action indeed.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

So that's also a very Chinese approach to it.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I'd like to come back to the report. I'm sure you will know everything, all of these issues. Get caught up in the analysis of everything we talk about here. But just, you mentioned a point, sir, about the competing narratives, and this is something I think China does. One of the first books I wrote or one of the most significant books I wrote when I was doing my PhD was Cultural Realism by this guy at Harvard, Alastair Ian Johnson. Saying, you know, Chinese tend to see themselves as purely defensive. You know, strategically, historically, we've always been a very peaceful, you know, Confucian, society, we're not interested in war conquest. At the same time, you know, there's this other narrative looking at, you know, centuries of warfare and conquest and expansion of the state. So I think that's true of most places.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Right? Like we talk about the security dilemma and my intro to IR classes and how countries always think they're acting defensively. So, You know, these different narratives, the defensive posture and the aggressive expansionism, I think if you know, it makes it really hard for people to think very clearly about China. Because if you have 1 or the other, driving your thinking, it kinda gets hard to get inside of that box. So, Asaf, I think in this report, it does a good job of acknowledging the importance of, you know, Just how how much international narratives about China are driven by these different frameworks. But I think everybody made a pretty good effort to not use it to shape the analysis. Can you explain why you made that choice? Did you come

into this study with Preconceived notions about the expansion of Chinese power and influence in MENA?

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

1st, I hope, we're not preconceived. You know that, every analyst hopes that even it can recognize the potential biases and get along with it. And, usually, analysts believe that they can cope with this bias and give an unbiased analysis. Well, first, I can say that we tried not to be preconceived, but I think that there's something else, and it is part of the methodology of the research. From a strategic point of view, if you are a strategist It tries to plan your strategy, coping with China. It is very important to understand what the Chinese strategy is. If there are 2 very different narratives, it is really hard to develop a strategy that copes with both of them. But we do not look at this research on the strategic level, per se. We tried to get into, the operational perspective, and I believe This is an assumption of the of the analysis that if you look at the operational, point of view from the operational point of view, It is less important what is the real, strategy of China because, the implications From a if I look at it from a very broad perspective, we look much the same.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

If we put aside, of course, the possibility That, Israel and China will confront, directly in the future. What happened in the past 50 years ago, a little bit more than 50, Israeli forces and Russian forces in the Middle East really fought one against the other. But if we put aside this possibility And we assume that, China will not be an enemy direct enemy of Israel. I think that if we look at the Potential implications of both strategies from the operational point of view, for exam arms arm sales, Transfer of technology, military presence, and even, to some extent, intel corporations or military corporations of China and the Middle East, The outcomes will look much the same if at least in the first steps, until China is will have, Enormous bases in the Middle East and will cooperate with states. In the first steps of Chernin's presence, I think that, From operational point of view, things will look the same. We will be we will have to, cope with the potential arm sales, which can be part of either strategy. We'll have to cope with the potential of, techno high-tech technology transfers to the Middle East. I think that, even if you look at, drills Of, China and Iran, China and Russian, rivalries in the Middle East.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

You can find them in both strategies. If on one side, the narrative of expansionism. On the other side, the ambition of China is just to protect its commercial routes. I think that our methodology helped us to put aside this dilemma And they overcame it without the necessity to decide which was the which or which is the real strategy of China.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. Okay. Saraf, coming back to you. I think when I was reading the report, When I got to chapter 4, I thought to myself, this was the good stuff. Because, again, like I said, there's a lot of people speculating about China's security role, or what we think China's security role will be, but it's really, really politicized. It's an issue that people feel very, very strongly about and they don't



always go too deeply into it. So in this report, you did. You put together a really good overview of what China's doing in the region and security terms.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Asaf mentioned a little bit in his first answer, but how do you assess China's security role in the region today?

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

Look, Jonathan. China's security role in the region at this moment is minimal. It's negligible compared, you know, to the United States and Russia, Maybe even France and Italy in terms of military presence, in terms of arms sales, In terms of security cooperation and agreements, you know, China doesn't have any alliances in the region, real alliances. But There are 4 main sectors in which China has significantly expanded its presence, since the 2000 and tens, and that do have security implications. You know, first, the expansion of civilian infrastructure, whether ports, industrial parks, smart cities. 2nd, tech transfers to MENA countries including dual use technology, including cyber capabilities, and space capabilities. Space, no, new technologies. The 3rd sector is arms transfers, and we'll come back to this.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

And the 4th one is, of course, expanding defense cooperation with MENA countries. I'd like to first highlight the issue of civilian infrastructure. I know, Jonathan, you've written a lot about these issues and especially the industrial park and ports connectivity. What is amazing is to see that there's been a tremendous expansion of China's construction of civilian infrastructure since 2013. You know, China has established over 200, large scale infrastructure and energy projects in the region. And we see that actually the Mediterranean The Mediterranean space is the 2nd largest region or most concentrated region of Chinese infrastructure after the Indian Ocean. So that's already an interesting point. So why do we have a concern? The first concern is that, of course, China could leverage its civilians, presence, its economic investments infrastructure and in particular commercial ports, as a soft security inroad In the region, and I think this is a concern that is increased, by 2 dimensions.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

First of all, the Chinese concept of MCF, the military civilian or civil fusion, is the idea That you develop your capabilities and you expand your presence by this merging of military and civilian elements. And the 2nd concern, rises from the gap between the new mandates that the PLA received to expand its presence overseas and beyond, of course, the South and East China seas and the real and actual infrastructure that China Has at the moment. So basically and this is a point that is being made by Isaac Carden. Basically, China is developing civilian strategic, you know, structures or nodes, across the globe that could be used for civilian but also for military purposes. The 2nd concern, and here we're talking mainly about, maybe an Israeli point of view, Is that this development, this expansion of civilian infrastructure, you know, owned and operated by China Does, create new constraints for the air forces operating in the area. You know, those air forces will be compelled to consider Chinese interests, during the operational

planning and maybe in times of war. So this is also a big concern. Now let's talk about the technology transfers to MENA countries.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

Of course, we know that from a US perspective, the communication and digital technology stuff is a huge issue, but I'll talk more from a regional perspective and more from an Israeli perspective. First of all, of course, we have the problem of space technology. You know that China has considerably expanded its cooperation in space and space technology with key actors in the area with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, but also with Iran. And just to make one point that it might be problematic is that Iran, for example, has received access to China, BDO 2 systems in 2021, making it only one of the 2 countries in the world with such access, the other being Pakistan. And as we know, the BeiDou, 2 systems, which is the competitor to the GPS systems, can significantly enhance the accuracy, effectiveness and lethality of missiles and drones. So that's another issue. The third domain that is problematic is tech cooperation. First of all, the concern, you know, connected to the dual use A technology that is being given with the potential military applications, the transfer of communication technologies that might boost the recipient's surveillance capabilities.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

But most importantly, what is of concern is China's practice of not only providing key technologies but providing the production know-how and capabilities. And that is a major concern, you know, from an Israeli point of view that China is giving, is enhancing the capabilities of regional actors to self-produce the technology that China is developing, for example, the combination of drones and AI, and this is, a major concern. With regards to the arms transfers, of course, China is focused on niche markets mainly on UAVs. And, of course, China has leveraged, you know, the regional actors need to replenish their arsenal in drones and they know that the United States is not very excited about giving drones to regional actors, so there's been a combination of interests. So we've seen a dramatic increase in China as exports of drones to the area. And that raises a few operational concerns. The first one is that despite the limited scope and the low quality, Chinese arms exports have dramatically increased the number of drones and missiles and artillery systems in that. So the concern is mainly quantitative. Meaning that the resources and the attention that the air forces would like to address to concentrate on other issues will have to be relocated or transferred to the drone issue.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

So it takes away some resources from the air forces, in operating in the area. And the second point is that, Chinese exports, as I've mentioned before, will boost and diversify the force buildup of the regional countries, including Israel's enemies and adversaries. Again, by transferring, the products but also, the technologies. I would like to end the increased defense cooperation with MENA countries we've seen arise in partnership agreements. We don't know exactly what is the exact commitment of China, you know, to provide what it is committed to providing, to the GCC countries and to Iran. You know, a case in point is the strategic cooperation deal that was signed with Iran over 25 years ago. There's a lot of questions and

speculations regarding the content of those cooperation agreements. But what we see is that we have an expanding scope of defense cooperation with the GCC countries and with Iran that is also raising concerns. The last point is about the military base.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

There's a lot of talk about Djibouti and its operational implications, but there's also a lot of concerns about the expansion of China's military base. We've talked together, Jonathan, about the speculation over the establishment of a military base in the UAE, But you have a lot of concerns about the expansion of military bases in the Middle East and in other areas, which also would boost China's military presence in that area in the near future.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

So much in that. And one thing when you're talking about the Beto satellites, there's a really good book, I think from last year, maybe the year before Surveillance State. And I can't remember the author's names, but there are a couple of reporters of the Wall Street Journal. And they're talking about how a lot of the smart city technology and the satellite technology that China is. We can use this technology to help you develop, your Your economic capacity in your state, and we can use it for really peaceful purposes and advancing your development. But you can also use it for some really Shady stuff that causes a lot of problems too. Right? So the dual purpose of this is something that doesn't always get talked about a whole lot. It's interesting because as a Western liberal, when I'm talking to people from the Canadian or the American embassies or whatever, We'll often talk to people from the region and say, do you have any qualms about how this stuff can be used? Because we clearly would in our societies. And they say, no, we don't.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

We actually find this could be quite useful, for a lot of what we're trying to achieve. For the cooperation agreements, I agree there's a lot about what's in these things. I've read a lot about them. And I've read a lot of Public facing statements about this is what the China Saudi, you know, comprehensive, cooperation agreement is. And most of it is very bland in general saying all this is a commitment to cooperate on stuff of mutual interest. And anything that we, You know, any areas where we diverge, we're just going to put this on the back burner and come back to it later when we build up trust in political capital and other stuff. So there's typically not very much quantifiable in it. Like when you see the report about the Iran one being \$400,000,000,000, you know, China hasn't given anybody anything close to that much money in you know, since well before 2017.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

So it seemed to me that that was more of a wishlist from Tehran saying this is the stuff we want, and this is the stuff we hope China will give us. And, you know, a lot of the leaks of a lot of the quantifiable leaks about that partnership, I think, came out of Tehran. I think China immediately backed up and said, hey. We didn't say any of that stuff. So I think we have to take a lot of them with a grain of salt. But, Assaf, I'd like to come back to the points I was talking about with just

the tech cooperation and how this impacts the air domain. Because I think this is where it gets really interesting to me as a nonspecialist. It gives me a lot to think about.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

So can you just give us a brief overview of how you see this tech cooperation with China affecting specifically the air domain for regional militaries or regional governments?

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

Yes. And I'll continue from where, sir, just mentioned the quantitative perspective. The fact that they sell a lot of weapons or weapon systems that are not usually the most sophisticated. But on the other side, we must remember that, the military air domain always was, and I believe always will be, very high-tech. Air dominance is usually connected to technological dominance. And if you control the, Better the technology, you can better control the air. And what we've seen in China in the last, in the several last decades is a tremendous change. In the past, China bought weapons systems from the Soviet Union And, locally produced them, and then they began cloning systems.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

But this was in the past. In the last decade or last 2 decades, China began developing its own technological capabilities. For example, they are much better than Russia. For example, today, they have a 5th generation aircraft. Russians don't really have such aircrafts. They produce new radars, AESA radars, seekers, anti satellite systems, etcetera. And, They have very good military technologies, but not only. They also control what Sarah called dual use, technologies such as, producing computer chips and communications and SATCOMS and artificial intelligence In quantum technologies, all these can be, used as you mentioned for, military use.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

And what I, I think you should take into consideration is that the transfer of such technologies From China to the MENA region can help states here in the regions produce much better weapon systems. And I think the most bold example is Iran. Iran has an exceptional industry for weapons. They're really good at it. And they can produce various systems. They are very good inventors. They managed to find solutions to difficult problems. And with the assistance of high-tech, Chinese capabilities, they can move much farther, much more rapidly, than in the past.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

I think this is the most challenging, if we talk about the air domain, not only the supply of Chinese systems, or a supply of Chinese technologies, which will help the Iranians run much faster in this game. We use the phrase, qualitative, military edge, to describe, The capability to have better technologies, better capabilities over your opponent, and this is a very important part of the Israeli perspective of its posture in the Middle East. And I think that, the transferring of Chinese Technology which can be used as part of, weapon systems produced in the Middle East Might harm this qualitative military edge, which today is based upon Israeli capabilities and US, capabilities that are sold to Israel when we see the gap between Western technologies and Chinese technologies Become narrower, I think that this might harm this, qualitative military

edge. I think this is something that should be taken into account Both by Israel and the US in this area.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Yeah. I think you're while I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, you know, this this podcast isn't one that people should be listening to if they wanna feel better about, About the future where every episode, I feel like we're saying, like, go find a picture of a kitten or go hug a baby or something. But That's but, you know, they're all really good points, especially if I tend to underplay what China does with Iran just because the point you make is that Iran has a very good indigenous capacity for developing a lot of stuff. But, you know, the tech that China's providing for other sectors, of course, It's all dual it's all due dual purpose. So it does really change the landscape in a lot of other ways. Sarah, we'll wrap up. And I'd like to ask each of you, but I'll ask you first, Sarah. How should regional governments and folks working in Regional security issues be thinking about a greater Chinese presence, not just in terms of the threats, but, you know, are there opportunities for regional actors as well?

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

So I'd like to self discuss the opportunities. Maybe we'll start with the threats to finish on an optimistic note. Right. I mean, in terms of thinking, I think there are 3 narratives that we showed that regional governments, and also global powers like the United States should have in mind. The first story is about the fact that Chinese imprints On, MENA's strategic architecture will become more significant in the coming decade. You know, out of a series of factors, you know, China, Russia being bogged down in Ukraine, and China developing its relationship with the regional actors, and the regional actors having greater Strategic autonomy, you know, so there's a lot you have a lot of, factors, that lead us to think The China's security imprint is here to stay and is here to grow. Okay. The second story Is the story about China's great transition.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

You know of the 20th century from the cold war era To now, you've seen China producing, you know, low quality domestic production With a high dependency on imported advanced technology, you know, basically using outdated Soviet staff To now, developing a domestic production characterized by increasingly advanced weaponry. And actually, China is taking the lead in several key sectors that will shape The face of 21st century warfare. And this third story is about, the, combination of China's advances in technology and weapon systems In key attractive sectors that will lead 21st century warfare, you know, Russia's depleted defense industry and export capabilities, China's intensifying connections with the MENA states and we have to see whether China will go Further and further towards Iran and Russia in our turbulent region and Beijing's limited self restraints when it comes to arms and tech transfers. So all of this together, you know, point To a a high potential for, wide scale and higher quality Chinese technology And arms transfers to regional actors in the foreseeable future. So this is the story of the coming decades in our perspective. And in order to understand this story, I think the right approach and we are not China experts. We're working for a center that specializes in air and space studies. The right approach is to try to really disconnect the strategic dimension of China's presence with the operational one.

**Sarah-Masha Fainberg:**

The idea is to look at what China does, not what China says or what China wants. And that's the main perspective that regional actors should maintain, you know, on China. Asaf.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

Well, Sarah, let me talk about the opportunities, And, unfortunately, I can and talk a little bit about opportunities, but I really see basically more and more threats. If you try to look at it from the positive point of view, I think that China might play As a mediator in the Middle East for solving conflicts, for example. I think that, if you look at Chinese money, it can be invested in improving infrastructures. In Places where people really suffer these days in the Middle East, there are many places like that. And, Chinese money can do, do some good things for, for the people here peoples in the Middle East. But, unfortunately, I think that the increase in Chinese presence in this decade occurs at a time when global conflicts between east and west Is, rising. And if we take this into account, we might understand that China will wear more military uniforms Then, suits in the near future, simply because this is what's happening globally. Maybe 10 years ago, if China had come here to the Middle East, we might see a different Chinese behavior, but I'm afraid that a lot of the money and influence will go into military issues. And it means some things for, for us, for Israel, I think not only in Israel, but many other players in the region.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

1st, we must not turn a blind eye to the Chinese influence potential. It's not only strategic influence, It is also operational influence. We should take it into account. And, to put an eye on the Chinese presence here, Especially I think when we talk about technology, which is very hard to track. Is that more easy to attract the arm sales than transferring of codes, for example? And, to look at the military corporations or future possible military corporations, an intel cooperation between China and local players. And, finally, I think that, Players from the west side might act together, and find solutions together. And to this challenge, it's something that every state on its own Cannot find a solution to. Nowadays, we see in the Middle East 2, coalitions beginning to form. The coalition, headed by Iran with the support of Russia and maybe China. And the US led coalition, at least what the US plans to, to create in the Middle East, and I think that, these coalitions will first, it will force Countries to choose sides.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

And, after a country chose sides, I think the countries on the, What's called a good side, should act together. Because the potential threat of Chinese involvement is tremendous.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

Well, I gave you the chance to wrap us up on a positive note. But you know what? I think a realistic note is more important than a positive one sometimes. And I appreciate it. I think you've both given us a good dose of realism, a lot to think about. I don't know if your report is available to the public, but I certainly do Hope that, that you get in front of as many eyes as possible because I thought it was quite useful. I think other governments in the region would benefit from

a similar type of analysis. And I I hope you get a chance to brief some folks about this. Thanks for joining us.

**Dr. Assaf Heller:**

Thank you. Thank you so much.

**Jonathan Fulton:**

And to our listeners, Yeah. You too. To the listeners, thanks for joining us again, and we look forward to seeing you next, next episode. We've got a great episode lined up. I'm sure you're going to enjoy it. Make sure you like, listen, subscribe, and all that other good podcast stuff. And we'll see you all soon. Thank you.