

In this episode of China-MENA, titled "Unpacking Influence: China's Impact on US Strategy in the Middle East," join our host Jonathan Fulton and guest Dana Stroul, director of research and senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East, as they explore China's evolving role and its impact on US policy in the Middle East and North Africa. This episode delves into global partnerships like the US-UAE-G42-Microsoft collaboration, the strategic significance of 5G technology and cloud computing, and the role of China on Iran's behavior changes. Among other themes, Dana also discusses:

- The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
- How to safeguard strategic partnerships amidst China's rise
- Contrast between China and US infrastructure support
- Evasion of sanctions: Iran, Russia and China
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Join us for an insightful discussion on the future of the US and its strategic goals in the region.

Takeaways

- US vs. China in Regional Influence
- Importance of International Order
- US Strategic Partnerships
- China's Regional Impact

Quotes

"China, as the sole competitor shaping the global order, inspires us to uphold equity, cooperation, and shared prosperity." - Dana Stroul

"The importance of the Rules-Based International Order lies in preventing unilateral changes or use of force to alter recognized boundaries" - Dana Stroul

Featured in the Episode

Dana Stroul

Research Director, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Guest LinkedIn: [Dana Stroul | LinkedIn](#)

<https://x.com/dstroul?lang=en>

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/dana-stroul>

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 Media Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a non resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Over the course of this season, we've looked at China's growing role in the Middle East from a range of perspectives, but the U. S.-China relationship has never been far from the surface. Essentially, on nearly every issue we've discussed, competition between Washington and Beijing has been the baseline. To give us perspective on China and the Middle East, I'm happy to be joined today by Dana Stroll. Dana is director of research and Shelley and Michael Casson senior fellow at the Washington Institute For Nearest Policy. Prior to that, she was deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East, the Pentagon's top civilian official with responsibility for the region.

Jonathan Fulton:

She served in multiple other roles in the US government focusing on Middle Eastern affairs. Dana, welcome to the show.

Dana Stroul:

Thanks for having me today.

Jonathan Fulton:

It's a pleasure. I'm glad you could do this. I know you've probably been really, really busy for the past, I don't know, decades. So I'm glad you could get us in today. So here in the Gulf, we often hear that the US has kind of refocused on the Middle East, during this maybe the second half of the Biden administration. And a lot of folks in the region say that, you know, it's more about competing with China than it is a reflection of America's interest in the region itself. Do you think that's an accurate assessment of how US leadership sees the Middle East?

Dana Stroul:

Well, what I'd like to do in answering that question is start with the big picture about the foundational and publicly available documents that the Biden administration put out in the first two years of his presidency to articulate what they said about the challenge of of China, which in the Department of Defense where I just came from after 3 years of service, they they spoke about China as the pacing challenge. So, first of all, in the Biden administration's national security strategy, they talk about China as the only competitor with both the intent to shape the international order and increasingly the economic, diplomatic, military, and techno technological power to do it. And then the National Security Strategy goes on to say that Beijing is using its technological capacity

and increasing influence over international institutions to create more permissive conditions for its own authoritarian model, so its own model of governance, and to mold global technology use and norms to favor or privilege Chinese interests and values. And then after the National Security Strategy came out, the Pentagon put out its National Defense Strategy. And there, it talks about increasingly coercive actions taken by China that are intended to reshape the broader international system to, again, this theme of fitting its authoritarian preferences. And then it talks about all the ways in which, China is both running massive trade surpluses, which have an impact on US national security, and also China's domination of critical markets where it can control commodity pricing and access to materials in strategically critical areas that could erode the health of heavy industries that the US defense sector historically relied upon. So that's the big picture. And when it comes to the Middle East, the the United States obviously has a very long history of involvement in the Middle East, and it and the Biden administration defined its objectives in the Middle East broadly as 4.

Dana Stroul:

One is countering Iran's destabilizing actions. That's both, with respect to its nuclear illicit nuclear weapons program, its support for terrorism, then countering violent extremism. And I would, recall for your your listening audience here that there are still thousands of US forces on the ground in Iraq and and Syria, making sure that ISIS or Dash can't return to the region. Also, freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce, which is obviously a pretty pressing, issue at this moment in time, and then ensuring that Israel has what it needs to defend itself, and this was long before October 7th. And then the final reference point for how this administration sees the Middle East, a really good document to look at is when president Biden visited Jeddah in the summer of 2022, and his team put out a fact sheet, and they describe the Middle East as the trade and technology crossroads between 2 hemispheres. And what the Biden administration and what that trip really laid out was that the Middle East is not viewed by Washington as important only for the Middle East, but on a global scale. And I think particularly when it comes to governments and leaders in the Gulf, they don't see themselves only as regional leaders. They see themselves as global leaders, and the Biden administration acknowledges that very much and so has sought to both cooperate where possible and warn of certain areas of engagement with Beijing that could threaten what I just laid out at the beginning, the ways in which China is investing in technology, economic influence, and other areas of the military industrial complex that actually are not, not neutral.

Dana Stroul:

It's about projecting China's own model of authoritarian governance globally.

Jonathan Fulton:

That's a really great overview. I see this a lot just in the region from talking to folks, you know, whether it's from here in the UAE or in other Gulf countries or or or in the Levant. Just the sense that they weren't sure. I think everything you said is a message that they've been receiving that, you know, China's seen as problematic. But it's often been, especially in the technical domains technological domains that you mentioned, where the red line has been pretty uncertain. Where they'd say, what is it that we can do? Because it's pretty hard to separate, you know, trade relations with China from technological cooperation. And especially when you look at countries' development agendas and and trying to move away from certain types of economies to become more modern. And I think what we've seen, at least here in the Emirates and and possibly in Saudi as well, that red line might be a little more clear right now, when we've seen the the G42 the investment that was announced in February.

Jonathan Fulton:

I think about 10 days ago or 2 weeks ago, recording May 29th, there was the announcement from the Saudi, AI giant that if the US made it clear that, you know, America wanted this company to divest itself of of Chinese AI, it would. Do you think does this represent kind of a a broader consensus in the Middle East that, you know, the US approach to the region is more satisfying, it's working, or is it just a preference for the tech that the US has to offer?

Dana Stroul:

Well, let me start by responding by responding to some of what you laid out. I think that, and something we really tried to address in the beginning years of the Biden administration, There was recognition, that every country, There was recognition, that every country, China is absolutely an important world power with a very relevant and significant economy, significant trade interests of many countries. The United States has a significant commercial and trade relationship with China, and we are not asking our strategic partners in the Middle East and in particularly in the Gulf to separate from Beijing. So a lot of what the engagement has been is to try to clarify exactly where that ambiguity is that that you laid out. And and here's the issue I think for the Middle East that makes how how we address these issues different from other parts of the world. The US military and defense relationships in the Middle East are so deep and so historic. We have 5 air bases with over 30,000 US forces across the Middle East. Countries in the Middle East are the most significant purchasers of US origin defense equipment, and clearly there's defense technological and technical exchanges going on all the time.

Dana Stroul:

There's also pretty extensive information sharing, intelligence cooperation, all of this. Knowing what China sees as its role going forward, which frankly isn't benevolent, and I think this is where there's a lot there's been a lot of discussion between governments and leaders in the Middle East and Washington, is that we have to protect these relationships. These are strategic partnerships that are relevant to the United States, enduring for the United States, and we want them to be enduring and important for our partners in the Middle East, which means we have to protect them. And so what has been happening over the past several years is discreet engagement with partners on specific issues where there have been concerns that deepening cooperation with China in a specific area puts at risk the US partnership. And that G42 issue that you referenced, I think, is a perfect example of this. So what we've seen, is that the United States has had some concerns about, G42's relationship, with China. The Microsoft agreement with G42 is a significant demonstration of mutual intent both by the government in Abu Dhabi and the government in, in Washington, and then I think also commitment to work, with the private sectors as well to guard both, defense technology and how we move forward in AI together, by frankly and proactively addressing where we have very specific concerns. And then one other thing about G42 and Microsoft, it's not just about what the 2 countries do together bilaterally or what the 2 companies do together bilaterally.

Dana Stroul:

We just saw the the implications and the potential on a global scale, which was last week when the Kenyan president, doctor William Ruto, visited here in Washington DC. And there was actually an announcement between the US, the UAE, G42, and Microsoft for, more cloud computing data centers, etcetera, in Kenya. So it shows that this cooperation isn't just bilateral but has these global implications to support other countries in their development goals as well. So what what I think the hope here in Washington is that this is a model for future cooperation. And let me add on the Saudi point since you raised that. If you go back and look at that JEDEC communicate from 2022, there's all sorts of examples of cooperation between the United States and its partners in the Middle East far beyond the Middle East. A great example is the 5G6G openrand, cooperation that's in the JEDEC communicate. Another one is a global infrastructure initiative.

Dana Stroul:

All of this is not just about the Middle East and what can be achieved bilaterally, but what cooperation together can pro productively affect on a global scale.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. I think there's a lot in that that I think is really important. You know, the the 5 g and the the the the g 42 Microsoft, I think is going to be really one of those pivotal moments that we look back on in a few years and say that was, a really big moment. You know, I've been watching China in in this region for for quite a while, and you could see there was just so much momentum, at least narrative momentum, about belt and road. And you could see things like the build back better and blue dot and all of these things that were kind of seen as US and like minded, countries playing China's game, or trying to play China's game and not really doing it well. And this, I think, is hitting, you know, hitting that sweet spot where I've I've talked to so many folks here in the Gulf, where they'd say, look, we need support in developing, you know, these these these new economies. We need to find new jobs for young people. We need industries that aren't based on on old models.

Jonathan Fulton:

And, really, whichever extra regional power that has the tech capacity, the political willpower, the the financial, capacity to help us with that, that's gonna be a really important partner. And I think what we've seen is, you know, through this deal, this looks like a model to me of what we can

Dana Stroul:

expect in the future. I completely agree with you. And and here, I would say, the US has raised its concerns with respect to certain areas of cooperation that governments or private sectors of our partners in the Middle East are contemplating with Beijing, but it also will require the United States to work with our own private sector. Because often, our solutions are where we're competing are too slow, too expensive, and there is a need to develop fast and make sure that there are jobs and opportunities for this huge swath of the population of the Middle East, which is young and hungry and interested and globally engaged. So I think this example of the US UAE collaboration with respect to Kenya, I hope it's a model and that there will be more creative thinking about how we can cooperate together, and that this isn't just about competing with China. This is about proactive, engagement with the global south with developing economies, which really is is a mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

Jonathan Fulton:

Maybe going off into the weeds a little bit, but I was in Cairo, I guess, in late 22, and we were talking about China's involvement in in ports and infrastructure and new capital city region and, you know, basically, across across a range of of things. I didn't get the sense that anybody, you know, was had blinders on. They they knew that this was a very transactional interest based set of deals with China. But at the same time, there was real concern that how do you get private companies to come into the Egyptian

economy and invest in the stuff that's important because there's always so many current concerns from the private sector about issues like corruption or, you know, are we going to actually profit when we go into this? Any idea how you can, you know, to speak to that when when you're talking to nongovernmental organizations to come into in more commercial entities to to engage in some of these less wealthy countries?

Dana Stroul:

So first of all, I would say with respect to Egypt, I think for for countries that are eager for development, infrastructure support, developing, their telecommunications systems, there's a view that US engagement comes with strings attached and conditionality and China does not. And I think that actually misses the point. I think that upfront, deals with China look more cost effective, faster, and no strings attached. It's just that the strings come later. So whether that means pressure on how a government votes and engages in the United Nations or other international fora, economic trade and commercial deals, diversification in economic trade and commercial deals. There are always strings attached because it this isn't benevolent. So number 1, the United States has tried to address some of this with new kinds of financing bodies like our Development Finance Corporation, the DFC, which is meant to be more nimble, to to be able to compete and give our strategic partners like Egypt opportunities and alternatives. And number 2, here again, UAE is actually a really good example because the UAE has been quite proactive in engaging with Egypt and it's not just, a loan or a grant to the central government and the central bank.

Dana Stroul:

It's real estate development, commercial projects will which will create jobs in Egypt. So so here again, and with a lot of the ports and the infrastructure desires of partners, and this is not even unique to Egypt across North Africa, Again, I think Washington is increasingly thinking through how it can partner and collaborate with Gulf governments who are also eager to make these investments and be more engaged beyond the the subregion of the Gulf?

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. This, to me, is really interesting because one of the, you know, the kind of tropes you keep hearing is China comes into the region and it's an economic actor, and the US is already here as a security actor. And this is just the way people tend to to frame it. And I find it really, I mean, wrong, obviously. I think the US maybe hasn't done the best job of showing people what it does across, you know, economic development, aid, whatever, just how how central the US is. I was at an event earlier today, here in Abu Dhabi and talking with folks from different, like minded governments. And one of the issues that came up is, you know, how do we promote a narrative of what we're doing

and and make sure it gets amplified. And I was thinking, you know, for Gulf countries and other countries in the region that are so focused on development, so focused on new jobs, on investment.

Jonathan Fulton:

When you look at China's trade, and you see these big numbers, it's a top trade partner of everybody. But often that trade is really, undermining the economies. Right? Like, China's sells a lot of goods to countries, and it and it undermines their domestic, industry. And then in other countries, they buy a lot of stuff, a lot of oil, which makes it harder to divest themselves of that. And so trade and services becomes really important. And I think that's something that really has to be promoted is what countries like the US or Canada or the Europeans do that help in in kinda going away from this model that has really been seen as hamstringing a lot of local countries.

Dana Stroul:

I agree with you. And I would say another aspect of this where I think the the US and other like minded allies and partners have a competitive advantage, frankly, is our system of oversight and our transparency. So when you sign a contract with the United States or the private sector, there are expectations and legal obligations for sunshine and are only in Mandarin. And then come and, either the spare parts aren't there, whatever is delivered, is broken. It's hard to do maintenance. The US private sector and commercial, engagements come with a whole suite of support and engagement, which I think is really important. And I would agree with you. I don't think the United States always does the best job of promoting the ways in which, it is value added.

Dana Stroul:

It's contributed to regional stability and security, which is obviously in some ways a challenging argument to make at this point in time. Yeah. But overall, what the what the United States has sought to do is support regional security and stability so that there are more opportunities for economic work growth, and that is to the benefit of the region, the governments, and frankly, given, the deep and extensive network of allies and partners the United States has globally. The idea is to work to integrate all of our partners and allies together across, the diplomatic space, the information space, the military space, and and the economic space, and ultimately that creates opportunities.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. It's a point I never get tired of making because, again, looking at this narrative of, you know, China's the number one trade partner for a lot of countries in the region, when you look at numbers 2, 3, 4, and on, a lot of them are countries like India, Japan, Korea, you know, countries that are US allies or partners that have very similar views of

what global governance and international order should look like. And I think a lot of local governments would be more susceptible to that or more aligned with that as well. So, obviously, it's really hard to get different agencies within the government to cooperate on anything, let alone across multiple governments. But I think if you look at it this way to say, look, Here's a broad coalition of states that have deep interest in your region's stability and prosperity, and, you know, we're willing to cooperate with you on on things. You know, IMEC is a great example of this or I two u two or any number of issues where you could say, look. We're coming. It's not us heavy handed saying this is what we want from you.

Jonathan Fulton:

It's a bunch of countries saying we've looked at this as well. We've we've got experience we can share and help and and maybe contribute

Dana Stroul:

to your development. I agree. I think that there first of all, I think at this moment in time, it can be challenging to talk about the rules based international order because the view is, pick which rules based international order benefits you. So the United States has frequently talked about, with respect to China and also with Russia, this challenge to the rules based international order. But I think there are many audiences in the region and many governance governments in the region, and frankly, this is not unique to the Middle East, who look at this and say, no. That that's that benefits the United States. That's yours your choice for a rules based international order. So my response to that is that that post World War 2 consensus about, the structure of global engagement, both from a military and security and defense perspective, but also trade, commerce, economy, etcetera, and diplomacy, has benefited the Middle East.

Dana Stroul:

Just take a look at these thriving economies and all of the exciting growth that's happening in the Gulf. That is on the foundation of the post World War 2 rules based international order. And at the most basic level, if one country in here, I'm talking about Russia, believes that those rules can be unilaterally changed or the boundaries of an internationally recognized country can be unilaterally changed with force, everybody loses. And the challenge if that aggression isn't stopped in Europe is how will Iran view that in the Middle East, and then how will China view that in the Asia Pacific region? And here, I think there's a tendency to look at what the US talks about with its concerns with respect to Taiwan. As that's in the Asia Pacific region, that doesn't affect us. But the implications for international shipping, free flow of energy, commerce, etcetera, if there is a war in Asia Pacific and the and Beijing decides to try to take Taiwan. The economic and trade implications for US partners in the Middle East are are vast, deep,

and serious, which is another reason to continue to invest in the current rules based international order and seek to cooperate where possible.

Jonathan Fulton:

Yeah. Absolutely. Our our the last episode we did was with Hassan Al Hassan, who's at double I double s in Manama, and we talked about that. You know, why aren't Gulf countries thinking more strategically about the Indo Pacific and how, you know, the Taiwan Straits issue could could impact local interests. And, I think that's something that's you know, in a region like this, where everywhere you look, there's something, you know, causing immediate distress, it's really hard to devote precious resources or energy to focus on. You know, something happened thousands of kilometers away, but, you're right. It it certainly is something that's going to impact here. I think the way you answer that, put this on a tee perfectly because, like I said, today's May 29th.

Jonathan Fulton:

Tomorrow is the China Arab States Cooperation Forum in Beijing. You know, president Al Sisi, president, Mohammed bin Zayed, the king of Bahrain, the president of Tunisia, basically, a lot of very serious Middle Eastern leaders or Arab leaders are in Beijing right now. And the way that the discussions are going to be led tomorrow are China's leadership in the global south, which, you know, is problematic on any number of ways, how it's defined. And, you know, does anybody get to self nominate, you know, as as this position? But a lot of it is going to be based on, you know, the hypocrisy of the rule rules based order and how countries of the global south should unite. And, of course, front and center for for how this is being delivered in the agenda tomorrow is, Gaza. That's going to be a big part of the agenda in what China's talking about. And they said, you know, the goal is to come up with a a common voice with the Arab League states to address this issue. I think China's response has has really seemed opportunistic in a lot of ways, but it is taking advantage of that kind of, narrative space at a time when, like you said, it's problematic in a lot of ways to talk about a rules based order in the Middle East right now.

Jonathan Fulton:

How is China's response to the Hamas attack on Israel and its its subsequent messaging to Arab publics and and governments affected thinking in Washington about China's regional presence. Has it become does it seem more, of a challenge? Does it seem very transactional? Does it create space for you to say, look. China's talking a lot, but really not delivering much beyond rhetoric? Or are people even really looking at China very much in this way?

Dana Stroul:

So I think it confirms what Washington already thought about China's role in the Middle East, which is that China is quite content to be pursuing economic trade commercial relationships. It will play with diplomacy when it when it, benefits China. But in terms of investing in in significant or meaningful arrangements that deescalate conflicts or promote stability and security, it's it's worse. It's not action. So, China posted, different, factions of Palestinian leadership, Fatah and Hamas, recently. That was a nice photo op. Nothing came out of it. I would note here that Russia also hosted, delegations of Palestinian, parties.

Dana Stroul:

So I think for from the Washington point of view, this this confirms that China and that Beijing will seek opportunities where possible to erode or undermine US, leadership and diplomacy in the Middle East, but but we haven't really seen anything come of it. Another really good example here is, the Yemen based Houthis who have, since October 7th, launched a very significant campaign of attack drones, attack, under sea drones, anti ship ballistic missiles that have essentially redirected international shipping around Africa rather than through, the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. This is seriously affecting, the economies of Egypt. It's it's jeopardized Saudi shipping, and given the geostrategic importance of the Middle East as this crossroads for the world, private private industry and international shipping picked a different way. In all of this, the United States has sought to organize allies and partners both in a monitoring and presence mission in the Red Sea called Operation Prosperity Guardian, but then also organized some very, precise military strikes to try to degrade Houthi infrastructure and capabilities in Yemen that's launching these missiles and drones. China's nowhere to be seen. And to me, this isn't about the United States. This is about upholding and defending part of the rules based international order, which is freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce.

Dana Stroul:

And this would seem, I think, from a Washington perspective, to be in every government, in every country's objective self self interest, which is to work together to uphold that most basic of principles. And here, we have partners we have partnership and participation from the Middle East. We also have it from Europe, but not from China. So so this is another example, I think, which confirms what Washington has already viewed about China's role in the Middle East, which is a lot of talk, but not seriously contributing, to de escalation.

Jonathan Fulton:

I think there's 2 points in that. I think one is that the Middle East on its own isn't really that important to China. You know, the same logic I just mentioned of Gulf States, you

know, more immediate priorities, I think, that that carries to China. When you look at the the huge number of countries it shares land and maritime borders with, so many of them are weaker, fragile states, or or hostile states, or US allies. And China's really gonna spend most of its time thinking about its its immediate periphery. I think when they look at the Middle East, it's a place either to make money, or to score points, but it's not a place to really, you know, play a meaningful role. And to me, that I guess the other thing I was thinking about in your answer there was, I think a lot of folks in the region didn't really see it that way. You know, when you'd see the belt and road and all of these big MOUs and big contracts and contracting and Chinese expat labor flows and and and, you know, all of this.

Jonathan Fulton:

China, for a lot of folks, it just kind of appeared out of nowhere in this region, and I think a lot of people saw it as a possible answer to some of the challenges facing regional governments. And just talking to people on the periphery of a lot of conversations in regional capitals, China's non response to the Houthi attacks was really, problematic, really eye opening to say, hey. We we expect more from our biggest trading partner. We expect more from a global power for you to kind of say, hey. They're not they're not hitting us, so, we're not gonna get involved. I think maybe that changed the way folks in the region thought about China too.

Dana Stroul:

I I hope so. And that, again, doesn't mean that there shouldn't be relationships between Beijing and the capitals of the Middle East. But just like between Washington and capitals of the Middle East, it's not all rainbows all the time. We have disagreements, and we're very frank with each other. I hope that's some of the messaging that Arab leaders bring to the summit in Beijing this week. And and one other point on Gaza. I think, at at some point, Palestinian leadership in a way that is acceptable to the Middle East is gonna be critical. And I think it's very important for Chinese leaders in the summit this week to hear from leaders in the Middle East about how problematic Hamas is as a terrorist organization who has been receiving support for years from Iran.

Dana Stroul:

And it's Iran that has increasingly transferred sophisticated weapons, money, funding, training to non state actors across the region, which contributes to instability and insecurity. And here, there's a really important and economically relevant China Iran relationship. And what leaders in the Middle East want is stability and security so that they can focus on global leadership, economic prosperity, etcetera. And Iranian actions, frankly, are gonna are gonna push them away from those goals. So I hope that, you know, just having a summit is not gonna be viewed in Washington as negative or a win

for Beijing and a loss for the United States, but it is an important forum for Chinese leaders to hear about priorities from the Arab world. And one of those, even if there are very serious, important, and real disagreements about the humanitarian situation in Gaza or the level of civilian casualties in Gaza, which are incredibly problematic. I haven't heard one government in the region say they don't want Hamas to be defeated and dismantled.

Jonathan Fulton:
Yeah.

Dana Stroul:
And that's going to require cooperation.

Jonathan Fulton:
So this is interesting because I think from the way you're describing this as, you know, kind of a closet optimist, I'm hearing you talking about how if these leaders from the region can go to Beijing and successfully convey this message and Beijing's receptive, do you think that there's space? I mean, given your job in DOD for the past few years, is there a space for China to play a positive role, and do you think that's likely? Would you think China could come into the region and support a regional order that's kind of firming up right now? I mean, from 2011 until not long ago, I thought there was no order. It just seemed like absolute, you know, chaos in a lot of ways. But you can see things firming up right now, and I think extra regional powers have that moment of decision. Right? What role are we gonna play in this? Do you see a potential for China to be kind of a status quo supporter here?

Dana Stroul:
I think that there if there were serious policy changes in how China, shapes its role in the Middle East and globally, certainly, Broadly speaking, the the the policy from Washington has not been, completely combative or focused only on competition with China. It has sought to find areas for cooperation where possible. So good examples of that are climate change, renewable energy, these sorts of big issues. Look, these are all big issues for the Middle East. So, sure, you know, one issue right now that I would say is really, strategically significant for the security of the Middle East is the Iranian supply of weapons and attack drones to Russia, which is being used, to kill Ukrainian civilians, destroy Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and in particular, energy infrastructure. And we've actually seen Iran borrow from the Russia playbook, which was the direct state on state attack against Israel in mid April where there was a combination of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and attack drones. But even before the April 13th attack, we've seen Iran launch attacks that basically are trying to take, energy infrastructure off the grid in

the Middle East. And a good example of that are the missile attacks on the Kurdistan regional, government and area in Northern Iraq.

Dana Stroul:

So here, I would say if you're a leader in the Middle East, you actually have an interest in making sure that that deepening Russian Iranian military cooperation, which right now is mostly killing Ukrainian civilians, but we just saw a demonstration of it in the Middle East, you don't want to see more demonstrations of that. And right now, China is both facilitating keeping Russian defense industry alive, which is something that Secretary of State Tony Blinken talked about during his visit a few weeks ago. And there's also a very significant China Iran relationship. So these are issues where if China if Beijing were to view itself as wanting to contribute to regional security and stability, I would hope the message they would hear from Arab leaders this week in Beijing is to call Tehran and tell it to stop. And another area where China could make a difference is if it chose to invest, in humanitarian aid and assistance, which right now the United States actually remains, the regional leader when it comes to Palestinians in Gaza. So they're all I'm sorry.

Jonathan Fulton:

Sorry. I was just gonna say, I remember when this China Arab States cooperation form had its meeting in, 2018, the big banner headline was China gives \$23,000,000,000, to Middle East. But then when you broke that 23,000,000,000 down, something like 21,000,000,000 of it was loans, you know, and I think 700,000,000 or so was aid. So not really stepping up.

Dana Stroul:

And, again, there's the splashy headlines, which really work for Beijing, and you always have to peek under the lid and figure out the details. There are always strings attached. There are always conditions. It's just whether it's up front or down the line.

Jonathan Fulton:

So you're you're mincing Iran, and that was something I want to try to fit in before we wrap up here. You know, if Arab leaders tomorrow talk to Chinese leaders and say, call Tehran and tell them to stop, and if China were receptive to that message and China said, you know what? Our economic interest in the region are undermined by Iran's actions, so we should get them to stop. Would Tehran listen? Because I have a theory that, you know, China's China has a lot of material incentives to offer, but it doesn't have much to offer beyond that. And there are times when Iran is receptive to material incentives, but I don't think this is one of them. I think what Iran wants right now I think they look at the situation in the Middle East as existential. And I don't know if

China's saying we'll give you loans, and we'll give you infrastructure, and we'll give you investment. I don't think if that's going to really translate too much. So do you think that China actually has that kind of leverage with Iran in their bilateral right now?

Dana Stroul:

So first of all, I would say looking back historically, Iranian behavior has changed when the regime in Tehran has perceived itself to be isolated. And China has demonstrated that it can work cooperatively on issues related to Iran. So the the best and most recent example is the Iran nuclear agreement that was negotiated by the Obama Administration, which involved, European capitals, the United States, also Moscow, and also Beijing. So one of the challenges now as Iran creeps closer and closer to enough weapons grade uranium for multiple nuclear weapons is that Russia and China aren't showing up as interested in working within that multilateral construct to put pressure on Iran. So I think that if the regime in Tehran all of a sudden perceived there to be distance and concern from Beijing, you might actually see some changes. And secondly, China right now is Iran's economic lifeline. It's the reason why the US led sanctions regime on Iran for its illicit nuclear weapons program, for its support for terrorism, for its use of cyber capabilities to attack and undermine other countries all over the world. The reason why a lot of these sanctions, are not as potent as effective and effective as they could be is because the Iranians have been able to sell their oil at a discounted price to China.

Dana Stroul:

And they have worked out a system, between Iran and Russia where there have been an exchange of best practices and lessons learned for, illicit shipments of oil on the high seas from ship to ship, gets to smaller refineries in China, payments are in Chinese denominated currency rather than US dollar denominated currency. All of this relieves pressure on Iran to make any of the changes that, ostensibly, most of the world would want, which is not to have a radical regime in Tehran, enabled by a nuclear weapon. So I think if, the Iranians perceive that the Chinese were no longer going to help them evade sanctions, were no longer going to continue to purchase their oil at discounted prices, or were ready to act, in alignment with the United States and European capitals, at the IAEA, at the UN Security Council, that would make a difference.

Jonathan Fulton:

Well, from, your lips to god's ears. You know, that I there's so much there's so much in that, but I think we're already kind of hitting the point. I could do this all day, but you're really busy. And I actually have to get to my kid's school because tonight is sports site, and my son thinks he's gonna get the MVP for basketball.

Dana Stroul:
Very important.

Jonathan Fulton:

It's very important. But, Dan, it's so thanks so much for this. This is really, really, I I could listen all day for sure. I think our listeners are gonna take a lot away from this. There's so much more to discuss about this. Hopefully, now that your maybe your schedule's a little less hectic, you probably, have a little more time to to to talk about this or rather than put out fires all the time. It'd be great to continue this conversation later on maybe in Washington or here in the Emirates. To our listeners, thanks for joining us.

Jonathan Fulton:

This is the last show for a while. We're going to this wraps up season 2. We're going on hiatus for a little bit. But, a little shameless self promotion. I've started a newsletter on Substack. It's called very creatively the China MENA newsletter, and I've been trying to update pretty frequently. So it's a place if you need more China, Middle East, you know, news, go to Substack, subscribe, and, check it out.

Dana Stroul:

And I will just say that I am a subscriber. I find it incredibly helpful as are many people here at the Washington Institute and across Washington. So thank you, Jonathan, for putting it together. There's a bunch of avid readers here.

Jonathan Fulton:

Awesome. Thanks. That's great to hear. Okay. Well, thanks everybody. We'll see you all soon.