

West Asia CHANGES Forever. The New China-Iran Relationship | Sheng Zhang

Today I speak again with Sheng Zhang, visiting fellow at Koç University's Center for Asian Studies, on China's changing view of Iran after the war, Beijing's split between Iran and the Gulf states, military lessons from Iranian strategy, the Strait of Hormuz, Trump's Beijing visit, and the wider message for US bases, trust, and power in West Asia and East Asia. Links: Achilles' Heel Self-Contradictions in the BRI's Middle East Agendas Aggravate Limitations of the Iran-China Partnership https://preprint.press.jhu.edu/anp/sites/default/files/Asian%20Perspective_preprint_Sheng%20Zhang_%28Spring%202026%29.pdf Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:20 China sees Iran in a new light 00:09:29 Iranian unity and wartime resolve 00:13:16 China between Iran and Gulf states 00:21:25 Military lessons from the Iran war 00:29:31 Hormuz shipping and China relations 00:36:33 China's wider regional message 00:40:24 Trump in Beijing with no real deal 00:56:24 East Asia lessons on US bases 01:05:36 Guest links and upcoming paper

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the third time, we have a young colleague, Mr. Sheng Zhang, a visiting fellow at Koç University, the Center for Asian Studies. Sheng, welcome back. Thank you very much. Thank you so much for saying yes to this, because you gave us some wonderful analysis in the past about the approach of China toward what is happening in West Asia. And that's actually what you study. I mean, you study West Asia and Chinese politics toward that. Last time we talked was, you know, a few weeks into the US-Israel-Iran war, and you said that China, at the very beginning, was extremely pessimistic about Iran's prospects. And by now, I think Iran proved that its strategy is anything but unrealistic. Can you tell us maybe a little bit about how China now looks at Iran and also the United States, and in connection with that, maybe also the visit of Donald Trump just recently to China?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think it's like in our previous meeting, like the previous time I joined the interview, I was talking about how China was actually happily surprised about Iran's performance in this round of war. And I was also expecting that as long as Iran is able to continue resisting at the current pace, there will be more and more, of course, diplomatic support, but also maybe some other more concrete, either economic or even support in selling military equipment and things like that going on

from the Chinese side and the Russian side. And I think right now, after we look back from today, it seems like our expectation has come true in a large sense. If you look at China's diplomatic attitude toward Iran and toward this round of war, it's getting much, much more positive after, let's say, several weeks to a month.

After one month, it gets extremely positive. And you start to see that China is blocking the US and its allies' UN resolution proposal to the Security Council. And China's statement regarding Iran became much more positive. And there is a—I mean, the Chinese never say this publicly—but if you look at some open sources from the American side and even from Israel, I think Netanyahu himself said that the Chinese are exporting some sort of equipment that can be used for military purposes for Iran. So that trend, I think, is getting much closer. And as we know, several weeks ago, the foreign minister of Iran visited China. And after that, he said something I think is very important. He said that the Chinese colleagues told him not to.

China sees Iran very differently right now than it saw Iran before the war. And I think that's a very straightforward but very meaningful sentence, like telling you that actually the Chinese are telling the Iranians that after this war, since Iran has really demonstrated its capacity, China is seeing Iran as a very important—not only a regional power as we often see it—but probably as one of the most promising regional powers in the region. And the importance the Chinese attach to that would be very different. I have this personal story. I have a friend and colleague in Beijing, and after, I think, two or three days after the assassination of Khamenei, this friend sent me a message asking me, "What's your analysis of this situation?"

And then he was asking, "Oh, do you think that after this round of war, Netanyahu and Israel would become the hegemon of the region, and when Netanyahu gets to the peak of his power," and things like that. And then, when they ask that sort of question—he's a researcher affiliated with one of the top universities in Beijing—so when they ask that question, you can tell how overall pessimistic the Chinese were during that time. They were feeling like, "Oh, look, Khamenei is assassinated, and maybe Israel is just going to dominate the region, and maybe Netanyahu is going to control power for a long time." But after that, you know, several months later, the atmosphere is very different.

The Chinese are convinced that the Iranians are going to stay for a long time, and they're also like, they believe that the U.S. war is actually not... the war is actually not going well for the United States at all. The Chinese are surprised by two things. One is the military capacity of Iran, which is how they were able to quickly refill their missiles and refill their drones and all of those things during the war. And this is a very surprising thing. And of course, from outside, we would argue that they definitely imported some key equipment from Russia and China and things like that. But from Beijing, the Chinese are very surprised that the Iranians are able to also have this very resilient domestic military industry, able to sustain the war. And that's one thing.

And the second thing is that the Chinese are surprised by the will of the Iranian leadership to sacrifice for the survival of the state. And it's a very surprising thing because, you know, like, in the

early 2000s, one of the, like, if we need to understand why the Chinese are very, like, hesitant about getting involved in the Middle East or supporting more anti-U.S. regimes or states, however we want to call it in the region, is because the fall of Saddam and the fall of Gaddafi were very quick. And China was, you know, like, in the beginning, the Chinese were expecting Saddam and Gaddafi to hold much longer, but what happened is they just fell very quickly, and the Chinese were very disappointed about that. And you can also argue that, like, several years later, yeah, like, Assad's fall in the end was very sudden as well.

You know, like, of course, the civil war continued for, like, 10 years or something, and the Chinese have been providing some sort of, like, diplomatic shelter to Assad's regime, either we like it or not, I mean, but that's what they have been trying to do. But also, like, Assad's regime fell very quickly. So, in that case, all of those things made China very, like, a little bit hesitant and a little bit pessimistic about supporting countries in the Middle East against the U.S. invasion. But Iran has really shown a very different thing. I think that's a very refreshing and, like, vision-opening thing for the Chinese at this moment.

It's like the Chinese have seen that the Iranian leadership is able to really, like, sacrifice a lot for the survival of the entire state. And also another thing that I personally witnessed is that the Chinese are, because in China there's a lot of Iranian students or, like, experts working in Beijing and things like that, and I was informed by my friend in Beijing that they noticed that after the war, a lot of Iranian students or foreign workers, journalists in Beijing, they're leaving Beijing and they want to go back to Iran during the war. And it's surprising to a lot of people. And they're also not government officials. They're just civilians who actually don't need to—they're not called back—but they voluntarily fly from Beijing to, I think, either to Armenia or to Azerbaijan, like to those two places, and then take the bus all the way from those places all the way back to Iran.

#Pascal

Hey, very brief intermission because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this can happen anytime again. So please consider subscribing not only here, but to my mailing list on Substack. That's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. I just want to add in support of what you just said. I mean, I just last week did an interview with one of the guys who does the little Lego movies, and we had a translator with us. In the end, he didn't have to translate very much because the other one could speak English quite okay. But we had him with us, and he's about... I would say probably around your age, younger than me.

And he was just a lecturer, had just become a lecturer in Pakistan recently, and was teaching there. And then when the war broke out, he went back to Tehran from Pakistan because he said, like, no, no, no, it's the war, so I'm going to go back and I'm not going to stay abroad. So this is something that happened to quite a good part of the diaspora who, during the war, instead of staying in safety outside the country, actually went back, even if they didn't fight themselves, which is quite

fascinating. But maybe that's also a topic for another time. So you would say that the cohesion of Iran, also as a society, is something that surprised China?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, because before the front of the war, the news we had been following and observing was about those protests happening in Iran domestically. And for that reason, many people in China, even the pro-Iran researchers I know, had pessimistic ideas like, oh, if, let's say, the United States were able to launch some sort of successful strike, like if they assassinated Khamenei, the Chinese were thinking, oh, would that cause Iran to have a very severe domestic rebellion as well?

So if there's a huge domestic insurgency supported by the U.S. or Israelis, whether that's in the large cities like Tehran or in the more border areas of the Kurdish region, that could cause a lot of problems. But we, like, again, the Chinese are very happily surprised that none of those things actually took place. And you see a lot of people who were initially very critical of some policies, like domestic policies and cultural policies of the Iranian government. During this war, they actually demonstrated a lot of strong sentiment of patriotism and anti-U.S. imperialistic ideas.

And when the Chinese see, like, all of those, like, lots of huge numbers of Iranian expats in China leaving to go back to the country during the war, the Chinese are really, like, emotionally and also rationally surprised and shocked and amazed by that. And for that reason, I think the Chinese come to the conclusion that Iran as a society is going to stay in this anti-U.S. imperialistic stance for a very long time. And we are convinced that Iran is a very resilient country that is going to be very important in the region even after this round of war, despite how much it suffered economically during this war. So I think that's some Chinese observation of the round of war.

#Pascal

This is very interesting, you know, because last time we talked, one of the main reasons I wanted to speak to you is because China, again, decided not to veto a UN resolution. The first time we talked, it was about Gaza, actually, and why China didn't veto this "Board of Peace" nonsense. The second time then was why China didn't veto the resolution that was put out, you know, which condemned Iran in the Security Council for its attacks on the Gulf states, where, you know, they try to pretend that Iran is the aggressor and the poor Gulf states, they are being unprovokedly attacked or whatnot, you know, and China didn't veto that.

And you explained then to me that China was treading this kind of balance, right? Between, on one hand, wanting to be on the good side of Iran and having interests with Iran, and on the other side, also having very important interests with the Gulf states. So it wanted to have friends on both sides of the Gulf, actually, and manage that. But also, part of it was that China was pessimistic about the

chances of Iran coming out on top of this. So if that has now changed, how do you think this will impact China's engagement with the entire region, especially with the Gulf states? Do you think that China will now defer much, much more to Iran than it did in the past?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think it's a very interesting thing because I think maybe I didn't talk about this in the previous interview, but basically, I think if we need to make some sort of little critique of Chinese foreign policy toward the West Asia region, there's basically an existence of two different, let's say, lines or factions or whatever—like different ideas existing within the Chinese system.

One is that, if we like, we are very politically and strategically close to Iran. As we know, we signed all of those strategic deals with them, and we always want to continue to buy oil from Iran, even though we know that we're going to be facing U.S. backlash and whatever. But the Chinese, from the early 2000s until now, never gave up buying oil from Iran, right? So China wants to support Iran in a lot of senses, to make the country strong, because we believe that Iran is the only country in the region that not only has the will to resist against U.S. hegemony in the region, but also has the capacity to do so.

And that's the only country we can count on that has not only the will, but also the real capacity to challenge U.S. hegemony in the region. And you would find that people who are promoting this type of pro-Iran sentiment are mostly, let's say, people from the government system and things like that—people who look at the issue from a more political and strategic point of view. But at the same time, if you look at it from trade, China is investing hugely in the Gulf monarchies. And China's relationship with the Gulf monarchies was exceptionally good in terms of economics in the last few years.

I think part of the reason is because of Mohammed bin Salman's reform. I think somehow the Chinese were thinking that the reform is going to succeed and believing that that's a good place to invest, which... I'm personally not that convinced, but many, many, many people in China who are mostly either private corporation owners or state corporation managers, they have this idea like, oh, the Gulf is much richer, so they want to invest there more. So that caused a lot of... I would say a little discontinuity or sometimes even conflict in our stance in the region, in that we are economically very close to the Gulf monarchies, but politically we're much closer to Iran, because as we know, the Gulf monarchies are strong U.S. allies, and many of them are even becoming like de facto Israeli allies in the region.

The UAE. Yeah, the UAE is basically like a de facto Israeli ally in the region. So, for that reason, it's like we have some sort of, like, our economic interest in some sense is going against our political interest. And that caused a lot of, like, discontinuity. And I would say that as much caused the disappointing Chinese abstaining on the previous UN resolution that we're talking about, because they feel like, oh, we have so much interest in the Gulf monarchies, so we don't want to irritate them much. And for that reason, also, the Chinese have been, in joint communiqués, giving

acquiescence to the UAE's claim over the three islands, like the three disputed islands between the UAE and Iran.

And the Chinese never say that we recognize those as UAE territory. But in the joint communiqué, the Chinese just don't say anything against it. And that caused, I think, at least two rounds of severe diplomatic backlash from Iran in the last five years about this issue. So that's causing a discontinuity, and I would say an increasingly important one, in Chinese foreign policy toward West Asia. And I think this front of war is probably going to fix it gradually, in the direction that the Chinese are realizing the importance of Iran. And also the Chinese capital would realize that the Gulf monarchies are actually not that safe a place to invest. And that's a very important thing. You know, like when you talk to them, telling them, like, oh, you shouldn't invest too much into those places for other reasons, you say, like, oh, it's not that safe.

I mean, they don't believe you. If you say, like, oh, it's going against the political long-term interests, many of those business managers don't care. But what Iran has done this time is that by attacking Iran, those Gulf monarchies are sending out a message to the rest of the world, including China, that those Gulf monarchies are not as safe as you think, and your investment in the region can be damaged if Iran is pushed into a corner. So for that reason, I think it's actually, through a relatively painful way, pushing China in the direction of realizing that we need to have a very clear Middle Eastern policy. And our previous so-called balanced approach is not very sustainable in the long run. And our, I would personally say, excessive investment into many of those Gulf monarchies needs to be reconsidered.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, that's very interesting. I mean, if the realization sinks in that the Chinese investments in the Gulf states are now safe only as a function of the safety of Iran or of the good relationship with Iran, it kind of puts things into a different perspective, right? It's not that these investments are safe because the United States has this impenetrable iron dome there. They're safe only if there's no incentive for Iran to bomb them, right? So, in a sense, it will make the decision for the capitalists in China actually a little bit more difficult.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah.

#Pascal

When you watch Chinese media and so on, what do you think about how China is now studying the development of the war? I mean, China has for the longest time worked on technology, also dual-use technology, especially drone technology, that for obvious reasons has very important military applications. But Iran did so too. And especially with the drones, they again showed, after the land

warfare that we've seen with Ukraine, how also in sea warfare, drones are just absolutely super important. On the one hand, on the other hand, the Iranian strategy was built upon, and that's what made a lot of us pessimistic, was built upon the ability to absorb shocks. So they were willing to sacrifice their leadership.

They were willing to have their cities bombed because that's the point. I mean, you can't stop the Americans from bombing, but you can absorb it and you can shoot back. And you can drive the point home that the other one needs to stop this. And that's what they did. So one part that this relies upon is having all of your really militarily important stuff, like many, many, many hundreds of feet underground, right? In places where even if you bomb the stuff, you just clear off the rubble and then there you go. Do you think that this—what the Iranians do with absorbing, but also what they call mosaic defense, the way that they are structured—do you think this will have an impact on how China will devise its own military strategy going forward?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think it's going to have quite interesting insights for the Chinese because, as we know, the Chinese have not gone to huge wars for more than 40 years. We haven't really gotten into any wars for more than 40 years. And also, like, 40 years ago, the wars we fought were more traditional, like conventional wars. And, uh, so for that reason, I think, too, like in the early 2000s, the Chinese were shocked by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and they thought that's a very new type of warfare. But, uh, in recent years, I think, uh, the Russia-Ukraine war, and also, like, this round of, um, not only Iran's war, but let's say we date it all the way to October 7th, from there and all the way to here, this round of war between the axis of resistance against the U.S. and its allies, basically the U.S.-Israeli army in the region.

I think this round of the war is also going to have a very huge impact on the Chinese mentality and their perception of wars. So for that reason, the Chinese are definitely, like, paying much more attention to the idea of not only area denial, like this idea of trying to repel the U.S. naval projection of naval forces into the Chinese area, but also to pay more attention to the development of drones, pay more attention to the development of missiles, and using those things as sort of a supplement to make up for the relative shortage of the Chinese Navy compared to the U.S., right? I mean, like, the Chinese Navy is building very quickly every year.

And, but at this moment, it seems like at least we're somehow a little bit short on power in the navy compared to the U.S., so we're thinking about using more drones and missiles to make it up and things like that. And also, this idea of decentralization of the military is quite unique about Iran. You know, after, let's say, Khamenei gets assassinated, the Iranians are able to basically disseminate the command chain into different divisions on the frontier and try to mobilize the people on the frontier to make decisions for themselves, but also in some sort of coordination with other divisions.

And that's a very, very unique thing we noticed from Iran, and I believe that there's a lot of things the Chinese can learn from that. And another thing I would say, like, let's say, besides those—like, those are more tactical things, right?—there's also this very important strategic thing the Chinese have learned from Iran, which is that, again, Iran has basically destroyed all the U.S. bases in the neighboring countries near Iran. And that's actually something very new. From the early 2000s until now, no one has done that.

Even Russia has not done that in the Russia-Ukraine war. And there was this idea that a country hosting U.S. bases can argue that we're just hosting U.S. bases, we're not directly in conflict with you, and you shouldn't attack our territory and things like that. But Iran has done that. And Iran has made it very clear that if you host U.S. bases in the region and let the U.S. military carry out actions of aggression against us, we would destroy those bases. And there's also a chance that, I mean, the Iranians did attack even some facilities in those Gulf countries that are not directly U.S. facilities. Right. So I think that's sending out a huge message to the world, saying that a U.S. base does not really make you safe. Actually, on the contrary, it's only going to make it more dangerous. And the Chinese are looking at this very clearly.

And it was like, if you look at how the U.S. responded to this thing, it was not that strong. I mean, the U.S. Fifth Fleet in the region suffered huge damage from Iran, and the U.S. basically retreated out from the sphere that Iran dominates. And right now, the U.S. Navy is wandering outside of the Strait of Hormuz just for, I would say, more politically symbolic reasons rather than actually preparing for an actual military invasion. So the Chinese would actually learn a lot from that. And that would, I would say, warn a lot of actors in the region of East Asia not to make the same mistake by inviting the U.S. into the region, into some sort of armed conflict with China. And if they do that, you have a very concerning outcome for that as well.

#Pascal

Yeah, it's quite fascinating right now, isn't it, that the missile range and drone range are becoming kind of a new de facto thing about installing your sphere on the high seas. In the past, the territorial waters of states used to be defined as, you know, the distance that a cannonball could fly, about two miles or something, and that would be the territorial waters. Now, the range of these missiles, somewhere around 300, 350 kilometers, is kind of what the American fleet dares to go close to Iran, and it stays out of that.

So that's not to say that these are new territorial waters, not at all, but it creates a new way in which probably maritime warfare is going to be thought about. Do you have any kind of information on how China also then approached the maritime situation with Iran? Because China obviously doesn't like the idea that the Strait of Hormuz is closed or that Iran kind of gets to have a toll booth

or whatnot. On the other hand, they're also completely, utterly aware, and they keep saying so. I mean, this is the mistake of the Americans. Do we know how China tried to interact with Iran in order to get its shipping services through the strait?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think it's very interesting that the Iranians have been playing a very good diplomatic move right after the war. They're saying that they're going to let the Chinese and Russian ships pass. And by doing that, they're basically trying to bring China and Russia to the side of Iran, at least in a micro-level way. And I think that's a very, very smart thing.

But again, within China, as I just talked about, there are different people, different factions, different ideas. There are some people who just feel like, oh, we shouldn't be too close to Iran because we're afraid of sanctions and we just want to make money. And those people, they still exist. But Iran, through doing things like sending out signals, saying that, oh, I'm going to let the Chinese ships pass and things like that, that is going to be received by the Americans as a sign that China is supporting Iran, right? Like, Americans would believe that way, or they like to believe that way as well. I mean, as a result, the Chinese, whether they want to or not, will be more and more glued to the side of Iran in this way, because the idea is, if you say those things, if the Americans perceive you as trading with Iran, supporting Iran, the Americans would put pressure on you, and you would be pushed actually more and more away from the United States and more to the Iranian side.

And that thing actually worked quite well. If we look at it, it's like the Chinese are communicating much more with Iran in the last few months regarding shipping and the purchasing of oil. And the U. S. pressure on China about this thing actually pushed China in the exact direction that the Iranians want to see. Like, for example, the U.S. argued that if you continue to buy oil from Iran or send out equipment to Iran, we are going to impose sanctions on those companies.

And the Chinese Ministry of Commerce just launched this very new and, I would say, very important policy saying that if any Chinese corporation is following the U.S. sanctions, then they will be sanctioned by China. Very, very interesting thing. And I think it's going to have a— it's a very revolutionary, like, new type of policy that is going to have a very long-term impact on China in the next two decades. I would say that the idea is, like, if you, as a corporation, are afraid of U.S. sanctions, and then you're saying that you are not trading with certain countries because of U.S. sanctions, yeah, then you're breaking the regulation of China.

#Pascal

So the Chinese Ministry of Commerce can actually sanction you for that.

#Sheng Zhang

I mean, for Chinese corporations. So that's sending out a very strong message, saying that we want to basically force our corporations not to think about the U.S. sanctions. And we want to encourage more of the Chinese, either state corporations or private corporations, to continue to trade with countries like Iran, despite the U.S. sanctions. So I think that's a very important thing. And if you look at it, we can talk about this thing, like both visits of Araghchi and the visit of Trump to China, right? After the visit of Araghchi to Beijing, the joint—it's not a communique, but like the joint statement—if you look at it from the Chinese Foreign Ministry's website, the statement we released was saying that, oh, like we want to see the Strait of Hormuz to be opened again. And we want the, like, quote-unquote, related actors to think about this thing.

#Pascal

And they didn't say Iran.

#Sheng Zhang

The interesting thing is that they didn't say we want the Iranian side to think about reopening the Strait of Hormuz. They said related actors. That means we do not think that Iran is solely responsible for the closure of Hormuz. Actually, we believe that it's the U.S. and Israeli invasion of Iran that caused the situation right now. And we still believe that. And we believe that if we want to see the Strait of Hormuz reopened, that is not going to be something done through unilaterally pressuring Iran about it. It has to be done through pressuring the United States to stop its threats against Iran, and it needs to be done through pushing the U.S. and the Israeli invasions to stop first.

And then the Strait of Hormuz would be able to open. So you can see that sentiment very clearly in Wang Yi and Araghchi's meeting and the Chinese statement released afterwards. And of course, the Chinese want to see the Strait of Hormuz opening. But I think on many occasions, we have seen very clearly that the Chinese have been sending out the message that they would not try to pressure Iran to open the Strait of Hormuz. And you see that in the Chinese dealings with Trump's visit to Beijing as well in the last few days.

#Pascal

It's quite fascinating to me because China very quickly figured out that all they need to do is insist on international law. I mean, even the four-point plan to come to a ceasefire and ultimately a peace agreement are all about international law—just live up to international law and the freedom of navigation. No, not freedom of navigation, but, you know, just live up to international law. And by saying so, they basically say like, yeah, I mean, Iran needs to get compensated because it was illegally attacked. The U.S. blockade is, of course, an illegal thing under international law. They basically put their weight behind Iran without saying so and are rallying for a global structure, a

security and trading structure in West Asia, which must sound quite appealing to many places beyond just Iran and the Gulf states. Do you have any indications of how others are now perceiving these Chinese actions?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think the Chinese direction on this issue is getting very... it's welcomed much more in the developing world. And I think either at the end of this month or the beginning of next month, the leader of Pakistan will make a state visit to Beijing as well. Beijing has been very busy in recent months with leaders.

#Pascal

Everybody, and Vladimir Putin is going to travel this week, I think, to Beijing.

#Sheng Zhang

Putin is coming, and Pakistan is—the leader of Pakistan is coming. And the interesting thing, like, why I mention Pakistan is that, as we know, Pakistan has been doing a lot, like, promoting dialogue in this round of the U.S.-Iran war. And Pakistan is in a very interesting situation. It has a relatively decent relationship with Iran, but at the same time, as we know, Pakistan has very close ties with the United States, historically and at present as well. And at the same time, Pakistan has a very long tradition of cooperating with the Gulf monarchies. So I think when Pakistan was doing those types of promoting-dialogue things in the last few months, I think they definitely took a lot of insights and maybe support from the Chinese side as well. As we know, the China-Pakistan relationship is also a very uniquely close one.

And I do believe that one of the major reasons why Iranians are interested in going to Islamabad for the talks is not only because they, of course, respect Pakistan, of course, but I think that there's also the China factor in this thing. The idea is like, oh, by going to Pakistan, we would be something like more closely aligned with China, like politically. And the Chinese factor may exist in those negotiations. So I think for that reason, I will be very much looking forward to seeing how this visit of the Pakistani leader to China will turn out and what type of joint statement the two countries are going to release regarding the current war in the Middle East. So, yeah, for that reason, I think that's a pretty important one. And I think you probably would see much more concrete things than what you saw after Trump's visit.

#Pascal

How are you interpreting Trump's visit? Because in a sense, Trump kind of made this basically a business trip. It's like, let's bring these people. And then China actually was fine with that. I mean, from my perspective, it was like, okay, you want to take pictures? Here's something to take pictures of. And then let's have a dinner and fine, and bye. It's like...

#Pascal

They were just nice. I mean, it's just a nice little visit, and that's it.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, yeah, it's a nice visit. I mean, I personally, when I look at Trump's visit, I feel like it's like an elderly rich people's tourist group.

#Pascal

Yeah, right, right. And then, like, Elon Musk taking pictures and tweeting about it. Okay, I mean, that's PR. Yeah, it's good for PR.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah. But that's all the things. I mean, I was closely following the news. I think today is two or three days after the end of the visit, and I was always waiting for something more concrete to come out, and it didn't. Even in the Chinese media, nothing really concrete came out. Like, if you look at the Chinese media, all the things they focus on are like, oh, Elon Musk taking photos, as you were talking about, Trump's banquet, how much he liked the food, and Marco Rubio being amazed by the ceiling of the Great Hall of the People. He was pointing to the ceiling, saying, oh, that's so pretty. So those are the news, the headlines that we're seeing. And we really didn't see anything more concrete out of it. And this is the last time the U.S. head of state, which was also Trump, because Biden never came.

So last time the U.S. head of state visited China was nine years ago. And this time should be like some sort of thing. At least I was expecting a joint communique on something. But even the joint communique was not launched at all. And there's no real agreement signed between the two countries about, like, any important deals. We see there are three T's that Trump really cares about in the China-U.S. relations at this moment: Technology, Tehran, and Taiwan. And if you look at those three T's, there's not much real thing that has been done. It's like, just like our way, uh, like on a very small scale, they may talk about something, but on those three important, uh, three important issues, there was no, uh, serious agreement being signed between the two countries.

And, uh, my sense is that the Chinese just want to keep him happy and make him emotionally happy on this visit and then send him off without making any real compromise on issues at all. I think... I

think the Chinese probably learned this thing from Putin. And if you look at how Putin treated Trump, it was a very, I would say, a very smart way, in that Putin would give out all of those, like, emotional—I don't know how to call those—like, emotional support or whatever things to Trump. He would spend hours talking to Trump on the phone and saying, oh, I agree with you on this and that, and saying, like, oh, we would like you to mediate between us and Ukraine, and we respect you so much better.

#Pascal

But if you look at what Putin's doing in reality, he's not listening to any of the things that the United States actually wants him to do.

#Sheng Zhang

So the frontier continues fighting. The Russians actually never really thought that the Americans would be able to mediate and end the Russia-Ukraine war in a very meaningful way. So it's more like an emotional massage type of thing that you just do to Trump so that he's emotionally happy and he's not causing additional trouble for you. And then you can basically capitalize on the conflict or disagreement between the two countries and basically do whatever you do in reality. That's what I guess the Chinese are doing at this moment—they talk to Trump and make him happy and let all of those, like, guys.

If you look at Trump's delegation, it's very interesting. The delegation is filled with two groups of people. One is the business owners, as you mentioned. Another is actually that there are a lot of hawks in Trump's delegation. Like many of those very hawkish people—not only like Rubio and Haley, those famous ones—but if you look at the relatively less famous bureaucrats he took, I think, for example, people like Stephen Miller and those people, they're very hawkish on the Venezuela issue, the Iran issue, and also China-related issues.

And those people don't really know much about China in their past careers. But they're ideologically very hostile to the left, to the global left in general. And many of them are deeply engaged in this war against Iran in their foreign policy. And domestically, many of them are engaged in basically suppressing the pro-Palestine movement in the United States. So Trump took all of those hawkish guys into China. And the Chinese idea is like, we don't really expect the United States to come to any real agreement with those delegations. What can they do?

I think the Chinese perception of Trump's visit is that he took all of those people, including the businessmen and the hawkish bureaucrats existing in the White House, to China not for the sake of actually wanting to make an agreement, but he just wanted to do this thing for a domestic rally. He wants to show his domestic audience, his supporters. There's MAGA—I mean, much of the MAGA split with him after his invasion of Iran—but he wanted to show the MAGA that remained loyal to him that he's still doing the so-called winning every day. If you look at the website of the White

House, he has a page called "Wins Come Every Day Under President Trump." I'm not even making this up. It's a quote. Yeah.

So, yeah, he wanted to show everyone that he's winning every day, every single day. And I think he's just doing this thing to prepare for his midterm election for the Republican Party. So for that reason, I think the Chinese are not treating this— I mean, of course, they're treating this visit very seriously, but more from a protocol reason, not from a strategic reason at all. I think it's more of a symbolic and protocol meeting. And if you look at how the Chinese talk about it, like in the statement released by the Chinese Foreign Ministry about the Trump-Xi visit and regarding the hotspot issues, including Iran, the word they used is that both leaders exchanged views on those issues. Right. In Chinese political jargon, "exchanged views" basically means we have nothing in common.

I said my view and he said his view. The Chinese political jargon has a very interesting way. They want to use the most neutral sentence to refer to those things, but normally when you see that, when they say like "we exchanged our views," that means we have all different views, that we have nothing agreed upon. If you see a sentence like "they candidly exchanged their views," that means they had an argument. "We straightforwardly, we candidly exchanged the views." So for that reason, I don't think there's any major thing going on between the United States and China in terms of agreements regarding the hotspot issues, including Tehran.

#Pascal

But we can properly infer from that that, yes, while China has no interest in making any kind of agreements with the United States, it also has zero interest in, in any way, shape, or form, humiliating the United States or kind of highlighting the United States. I mean, it's basically saying like, okay, fine, you lost out on this one. I mean, there would have been so many ways in which China could have just done a little, you know, just a little, let them know that China knows that, you know, the Iran war didn't go well. But that also didn't happen, right? It's like, so, okay, just make you happy, massage you, and maybe even support you a little bit with your photograph tour so that you can go back and sell this. So in a sense, like, okay, fine. I mean, here, have that. I do not want you as my enemy. But we're not going to be best buddies. Sure not, but I don't want you as my enemy. So that kind of approach at the moment.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, yeah. So it's basically, if you look at it, if there's anything important from this meeting, it's that after the war, basically Xi Jinping came up with this idea, saying that we want to form a new type of relationship with the United States. And if you ask, like, what is it? It's basically the idea of constructive but controlled competition. So the idea is that we recognize that we're going to compete

on a lot of issues. And we recognize that... I think yesterday, the People's Daily, the official media of China, published an article saying that China-US relations will never be able to go back to the previous good old days.

But we can at least construct something constructive for the future. So that's the idea from the Chinese. So Xi Jinping came up with this idea. We recognize that competition is going to be the main thing between the U.S. and China in the next few years, or let's say a few decades or even longer. But we want it to be controllable. That means that we don't want to have—especially, we don't want to have—any armed conflict with the United States. And we want to maintain our competition in a more peaceful way and a more controllable way. And we want it to be done in as little as possible. That's the idea.

I mean, we also didn't—I don't know how much Trump is going to treat this thing seriously, because if you look at it, again, the last time a U.S. president visited China was also Donald Trump, nine years ago, in 2017. And he was very happy during that visit as well. I mean, I remember they went to the Forbidden Palace together—Xi Jinping and him went to the Forbidden Palace together—and he seemed in a very good mood. Yeah, but only one year after that, in 2018, what we know is that he launched the first trade war against China. And the Chinese were surprised at that time because they felt like, oh, you didn't say those things during the visit.

You acted normal. You were talking about wanting to solve the trade issue through more dialogue. But why is that? After you went back to the United States, one year later, you suddenly launched this trade war. So the Chinese don't trust that type of strategy or visit anymore, especially with Trump. And also related to Iran, after this round of war in Iran, Americans always say they're going to engage in dialogue. And then what happens is that they assassinate other countries' leaders and then always say, oh, we reached out for a ceasefire. And then the next day they are bombing Beirut or bombing Tehran.

#Pascal

So all of this is registered in China, right? China sees that, you know, you cannot and must actually not trust what comes out of diplomatic negotiations with the United States, because they will undo it the next day if they please. So, right. I mean, that is also probably by now just well understood as a fact of current-day United States foreign policy, right?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, yeah. So that's basically, like, if you look at how the Chinese perceived this war in Iran, one major thing that the Chinese focused on is how untrustworthy the United States is, especially with the current administration. And basically, they would say that they would invite you to go for a negotiation, and then during the negotiation, they would continue to either bomb those cities, or they assassinated the leader, or they even assassinated diplomats who negotiated with them. And

for the Chinese, or for any other serious countries of the world, how can you trust any negotiation with this type of partner, this type of actor?

So for that reason, I think the Chinese really don't have any expectation or trust that Donald Trump is going to hold to those things he discussed with Xi Jinping for very long. And we actually do have this strong feeling that he's going to sabotage it one way or another, maybe after the midterm election. Because before the midterm election, he needs to show that he's winning and making the country into better shape or something. But if he loses the midterm election, he might start to be quite crazy on China-U.S. relations again, to basically rally more support and try to win the MAGA back, and then try to make more alliances with the anti-China hawks from both parties in the United States.

And, uh, so the Chinese actually don't feel like he's going to like this. Like, after he goes back to the United States, we don't feel like the relationship between the two countries is necessarily going to get much better. And that's based on our experience with him in the last administration after his visit to China, and also based on what we have observed about the U.S. treatment of Iran and also of other actors in the Middle East, and also of Venezuela and many other countries. Even European countries as well. It's like he says something during the visit, and then when he goes back to the United States, he does something totally different from what he promised.

#Pascal

Yeah, so in a sense, even if something positive comes out of it, you wouldn't know if it's going to stick, or you can bet that it will only stick as long as—not just Trump, but the entire political apparatus—sees it as useful. Very last point, last question. What do you think, Will, is China now learning about what is possible in its own near abroad? We've seen how Iran successfully basically demilitarized U.S. allies, the Gulf states, and in my view, they—except for the UAE—I think the others will go one way or another, somehow neutral, one way or another.

I mean, Qatar and Saudi Arabia already halted a U.S. attack, a further attack, by saying, like, you cannot use our airspace or military bases, and I think Iran is driving that point home. I mean, these military bases that the United States has built up all around China, including, of course, here in Japan but also in the Philippines, they look like they are, you know, set in stone. But it seems that stone is getting a little bit prickly these days. Do you think China is going to try something to, you know, also signal to its near abroad, hey guys, you might actually be better off without these things than with them?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think that's going to be a very major agenda of Chinese diplomacy in the next few years — to basically show the Chinese neighbors that U.S. bases would not make you safe at all, and are actually going to make you more dangerous. And we would try to... I mean, we tried this throughout

the... before this Iran war, that's always our agenda — telling countries, like, do not invite more U.S. bases in, and trying to lobby with them. But of course, as you know, they didn't really listen, they didn't really care, and they didn't take this thing very seriously. But with this impact of the Iran war, I think that's probably going to change in at least several countries nearby China. I mean, I'm not optimistic about the Japan issue because, as you know, the right-wing government is in charge and is very overwhelmingly pro-U.S. And despite there being a lot of protests locally, let's say in places like Okinawa, they have been advocating for basically stopping the U.S. bases for decades, and none of those things actually succeeded because the central government in Tokyo is still very pro these bases.

But I think with some more Southeast Asian countries, you would see that their attitude toward China would get much warmer than it used to be. And the Chinese would try to talk to those countries. I think South Korea might also be a focus of Chinese diplomacy next too, trying to talk to them, saying like, hey, you see what is happening in Iran, and the U.S. bases are only going to make it worse. A very funny thing is that the THAAD system—when South Korea implemented the THAAD system—the Chinese launched, I think, about almost one and a half or about two years of very cold economic relations with South Korea afterwards.

But still, the South Koreans deployed the THAAD system. And now it's like all the THAAD systems in the Middle East were destroyed by Iran very quickly in the first moment. And THAAD didn't protect those Gulf countries at all. And as a result, the United States actually removed THAAD from South Korea and relocated it all the way to the Middle East. So it's basically something that the Chinese wanted to do for a year and a half or two years, or even longer, that Iran basically has done for us in one minute.

#Pascal

It's a pretty big one. And also, the learning outcome for South Korea is like, when push comes to shove, Israel will always win. Uh-oh. This is what they do for Israel and for the Gulf states. Just imagine, like, South Korea got into an actual kind of problem—what the United States would or would not do. It's like the signal to the region is quite strong, saying, like, guys, you better not rely on the U.S. for anything that really counts for your national security.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, exactly. Like, if you look at how much the Gulf countries have been close to the United States, right, it's strategically important to the United States because it's basically the pillar, the foundation of the petrodollar system. So strategically, it's super important. And also, in reality, if you look at it in terms of politics, the Gulf countries are spending a lot of money on lobbying all of those U.S. senators and U.S. bureaucrats every year, U.S. politicians every year. And despite all of those things,

when Iran actually started to attack those countries, the United States didn't really protect them at all. The United States basically pulled out. And until today, the United States is basically not helping them at all with those issues.

#Pascal

It actively threw them under the bus. It basically said, I know Iran will fire at you, but we are willing to take that.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, they're like, okay, fine, we're falling out, and we're not going to care about you that much. And if you look at it, compared to the Gulf, Asian countries would not be seen strategically as that important in the eyes of the United States because they're not directly related to the petrodollar system or anything that important to the United States. And at the same time, Asian countries do not have that huge of a lobby system connecting them with the United States compared to the Gulf, like compared to the Gulf Arab monarchies. I mean, I know that Japan has a particularly strong lobby system in Washington, but still, I would argue that if you compare that to what the Israelis have in the United States, it's definitely not comparable.

And even if you compare it to, let's say, the Gulf monarchies, maybe it's either the same level or a little bit less, like a strong degree. And China is much stronger than Iran. China is much more... China could have caused much more severe damage than Iran could have to its neighboring countries if China is facing any sort of threat or aggression. So if you compare the two things, you can very easily come to the conclusion that if there's anything happening in East Asia that unfortunately causes some sort of armed conflict, the United States would not really come to protect its allies or support the allies in the region against any sort of Chinese reaction.

That's very, very easy for you to come to that conclusion. So I would think that after this war, all the countries in East Asia should be rethinking their positions. Some are already thinking about that. If you look at the attitudes of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia in the last few years, they're becoming much more positive. And I think part of the reason is they're realizing that the United States is increasingly unstable and increasingly untrustworthy. And they've started to be more balanced and show more signs of being more cooperative in their relationship with China on a lot of issues. Yeah.

#Pascal

It's going to be interesting. The ASEAN countries were never fully on board with the United States, but they are much more of swing candidates for how things go, or neutral candidates. Japan and South Korea and the Philippines are going to be a question. I take the Philippines out a little bit

because of what recently happened with their domestic politics. But this is going to be a discussion for another day. You gave us a lot, and a lot of very useful information. Sheng, people who want to follow your work, is there a particular place where they can go?

#Sheng Zhang

I don't use social media that much, but you can basically Google my name and find my pages on the universities I'm affiliated with, and you can also find my publications. I actually have a new article on China-Iran relations that's getting published, I think, at the end of this month. It's going to... yeah, in May, end of May or early June. And I'll send you the link after it's published. It's in the process of publishing, and it's basically talking about—the article was written before this round of war—but it's basically talking about the discontinuity of China's... as I was just talking about briefly before in our interview today, there's this discontinuity existing between China's two groups of people.

The more political side was aligned with Iran, pushed by the government system, and the economic side was more intertwined with the Gulf monarchies, pushed by corporations, both state and private. And that's basically the main argument of the article. It's going to be published by this journal called *Asian Perspectives*. And if you might be interested, I'd love to hear people's opinions after reading it.

#Pascal

Wonderful. I will put the link in the description box below once it's out. So if you're watching this video in June or July or beyond, then it should be there unless I forgot. And we will certainly have you back again on the show to maybe also talk a bit more deeply about this one in your paper. Sheng Zhang, thank you so much for your time today.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, thank you very much for your invitation. Thank you.