China's Cunning New US/Russia Strategy | Sheng Zhang

Sheng Zhang joins Pascal to discuss China’s approach to Donald Trump and the diplomacy surrounding the Shenzhen summit. Zhang argues that Beijing offers personal warmth while protecting its strategic interests and maintaining ties with Russia. They examine Japan, Taiwan, Pakistan, North Korea, and the limits of Chinese influence over partners. The discussion also explores nuclear risk, attitudes toward the International Criminal Court, and the distinction between diplomatic flattery and substantive concessions in an international order increasingly shaped by rivalry. Sheng's Links: Sheng’s Harici article on my Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com/p/apec-summit-how-china-uses-the-art And the Original: https://harici.com.tr/en/apec-summit-how-china-uses-the-art-of-emotional-value-to-deal-with-trump/ Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Sheng Zhang: decoding the summit’s diplomatic signals 03:37 Emotional value: China’s approach to Trump 11:49 Buying time and learning from the trade war 19:57 Conflict management and the message to US allies 23:33 Japan, Taiwan and diplomatic friction 29:29 China’s partnerships and the limits of influence 44:58 Nuclear war and the International Criminal Court 50:58 Diplomatic warmth versus real concessions

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, we have an update on what is happening between China and the United States with our friend and colleague, Xiao Zhang. Thanks for coming back.

#Sheng Zhang

Thank you very much.

#Pascal

Zhang, you just wrote an article that was published on Harici, and we're actually going to have it on my Substack as well very soon. In it, you analyze the recent meeting between the United States and China and, of course, the trilateral meeting with Russia. Now, you had a very special take on what the different kinds of niceties and pleasantries at this event meant. Can you give us a bit of your analysis? Because one thing that grabbed quite a bit of attention was that Xi Jinping went to the airport to pick up Donald Trump, but not Vladimir Putin, right? Especially in the West, this was debated quite a bit. What's your take on it?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I mean, the whole pickup thing is quite funny because in the West, they only tell you part of the story, saying, "Oh, he's picking up Trump and not Putin. That means he values Trump more than Putin, values the United States more than Russia." But that's not true, because if you look at the official name of this trilateral meeting, it's called the China-Russia-United States trilateral meeting.

#Pascal

May I just add one thing? Because this is quite confusing to a lot of people. The White House, for instance, whenever they publish something about the meeting, they always, always call it the United States-China-Russia meeting. But the official name given by China starts with China, right?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, yeah. The official name given by China starts with China, followed by Russia, and the United States comes last. And it's a very deliberate choice of words because, before this meeting, whenever there was a discussion of those trilateral relations, normally in Chinese, in academic circles and in some government documents as well, it was often "China-United States-Russia trilateral relations" and things like that. But this time, it's very specific. For the first time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry deliberately used the name "China-Russia-United States trilateral meeting" to put Russia before the United States. And that actually shows a lot about what the Chinese are thinking. So that's one way.

And also, if you look at how Putin was welcomed, Xi Jinping didn't pick him up at the airport, but he actually received a very high-level welcome from the Chinese side. And the Chinese are playing a lot of small tricks that English-speaking people may not notice. For example, when Putin was entering, the Chinese were playing Russian music for him—a piece of classical Russian music from an opera. It's very happy music. And Putin got that. He was smiling and found it interesting as he was entering. There were a lot of smaller things going on, and I think Putin got the message and the Russian government got the message. But maybe in the Western world, in the English-speaking world, they did not really take that into account.

So I wanted to first make the argument that the Chinese are actually using this meeting to strengthen their relationship with Russia. And there's no such thing as trying to give more respect to Trump than to Putin. That's actually not what is going on. And regarding why Xi Jinping picked up Trump at the airport and things like that, my central argument in that article is that I think the Chinese are trying to play some sort of strategic trick, let's say, with Trump. In China, we call that "emotional value." It's basically like, I provide emotional value so that I don't need to provide actual value to you. For example, I flatter you so that I don't need to spend money on you when we go out for dinner, this type of thing.

#Pascal

And that works very well on Trump, actually.

#Sheng Zhang

Actually, Putin is the first person who successfully did that and showed it to the Chinese. If you look at this period in which the United States was interested in promoting some sort of so-called mediation between Russia and Ukraine, the Russians did not take that seriously at all. Because if you look at how the Russian army is operating on the front line, they basically do things at their own pace. And they didn't really care about this US mediation.

But Putin would always say, "Oh, we take this thing very seriously. We really respect Trump's efforts in doing that." And he spent hours talking with Trump on the phone. Literally, if you look at how Trump was talking about that and how the Russian side was talking about that, it's crazy. Putin would spend hours talking to Trump about everything, sharing some life experiences, whatever, and pretending that he was very interested in these US-led negotiations. Also with Witkoff and Kushner, right?

#Pascal

I mean, the Russians spent tons and tons of time accommodating Trump's envoys and the talking side of the negotiations, even if they weren't real negotiations.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, so the Russians would spend a lot of time basically making Trump and his people very happy. And at the same time, the Russians don't take whatever Trump says seriously, so they continue doing what they do on the front line. And for the Chinese, we saw that and learned a lot of things from it. We found this a very, very insightful experience. And if you look at Trump's visit to Beijing back in May, half a year ago, that was basically what the Chinese did. They gave him a warm welcome and took him to all different places in Beijing and around China for fun. And no deal was signed, no actual agreement was signed between the two countries.

And there was not even a joint communiqué released by China and the United States back in May. And if you look at the media, all the headlines during that time were about very basic, very small details. For example, one media report about the meeting was like, "Oh, Marco Rubio was amazed by the beauty of the dome of the Great Hall of the People." And there's this video of him looking upward, like, "Oh, wow, this is amazing." Those were the news headlines. And there was nothing about anything concrete going on, or whether the two countries had reached any consensus on, let's say, AI, the high-tech industry, the Taiwan Strait, and all of those things.

#Pascal

None of those were discussed.

#Sheng Zhang

I mean, they were discussed, but none of those things were put into an agreement by the two countries, and you don't see them in news reports. So basically, the Chinese treated Trump and his delegation during that time as some sort of older people's tour group visiting Beijing. We host those groups often. They come, we make them happy, and then they go. And this time in Shenzhen, you find very similar things. First, we don't think that he will sign anything with us because we think that the structural conflict between China and the United States is very severe. And the Chinese have been trying for almost 10 years to persuade the United States not to see us as a geopolitical rival and things like that.

And the United States doesn't care. They just really want to see China as a global rival. So we don't have any illusions about Trump anymore. And also, if you look at Trump's cabinet, it's very right-wing, right? So the Chinese are not naive enough to believe that we can actually sign something with Trump. And another thing is that even if we sign something with him, it's probably not going to end well because, as we know, Trump just lost the midterm election. And if they continue like this, it's very likely that the Republicans will lose again in the next presidential election. So whatever we sign with him right now, whatever it looks like, the Democrats are going to try to sabotage it through the Senate.

And after two years, it's definitely going to be wasted. And I know Trump himself often changes what he says later on. So we don't have any faith in him to sign anything for the long term. I think the only thing the Chinese wanted from this meeting was for Trump to stop making trouble. That's it. And if you look at how our meeting in May worked out, Trump stopped making trouble for half a year after he did this older people's tour group thing in Beijing. For half a year after that, he didn't cause much serious trouble for China. And basically, I think the Chinese want to do this thing again.

So we hope that after this meeting, he will stop making trouble for China for quite a while. And by doing that, basically what the Chinese are doing is providing emotional support to him, showing that we are very interested in cultivating a relationship not only with the United States, but with you in particular. And we respect you in particular, and we take you to all of those fun things. I think they were playing “YMCA” for him. They found a bunch of Chinese kids to sing “YMCA” for Trump, and Trump was very happy about that. But actually, the Chinese would not compromise on anything concrete.

#Sheng Zhang

Related to the conflict between the United States and China.

#Sheng Zhang

You don't see, let's say, the Chinese compromising on the high-tech industry or economic problems, state subsidies for state corporations, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, or any of those major issues. You don't see the Chinese compromising. So whatever we're doing is just providing emotional value to Trump so that we don't need to actually provide any practical value to him in our bilateral relations.

#Pascal

Hey guys, autumn spirit is here, and we've launched our new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kiel symposium has arrived on T-shirts, tumblers, and magnets. The little fella is really cute. Check it out. Any purchase helps us directly to keep the lights on. So thanks a lot, and see you soon. Yeah, this is quite interesting. So you wouldn't say that this is in any way, shape, or form a pivot away from Russia, or the United States succeeding in driving a wedge between the two?

But it is basically the Chinese side just catering to Trump, to the Trump administration, with the goal of stopping the trouble, at least for now. We know we can't get rid of the structural conflict, but we might win a couple of months, maybe a couple of years at best. And any time that China can get without big structural trouble is something that will be good. I'm not sure if Deng Xiaoping actually said that or whether it was ever an official policy of China or not. But it is said about China that in the 1980s and '90s, the whole strategy was "hide your strength and bide your time." So it's kind of a continuation of that in this case, and a mini version.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, it's a mini version of it. It's specifically designed for Trump. Because, you know, it is a Deng Xiaoping quote. And Deng Xiaoping's idea was that China, in terms of its entire diplomatic strategy, should try to keep a very low profile. And he specifically said that we do not want to be the leader of the Third World because being a leader means you have to provide a lot of aid and resources and all types of support for fellow countries and their revolutionary and anti-imperialist struggles. And it can be very costly for China. So basically, during Mao Zedong's time, that was literally what we did. We put all those resources into supporting revolutionary struggles all over the world and had a bunch of successes.

One of those successes was, let's say, the Vietnam War. But Deng Xiaoping found that very costly economically. So he had this idea: let's stop doing this type of thing and start to keep a very low profile in terms of diplomacy while making money and waiting for a better time. And I think Xi Jinping is largely changing that policy. Right now, China is no longer like it was in the Dengist era, when we didn't take any political stances and only cared about money. That's not what we're doing anymore. But with Trump specifically, I think they're doing a very, very mini version of it.

It's basically like, oh, let's make him happy so that he doesn't make trouble for us, but we don't make any concrete deals with him. And that's also largely determined by Trump's own personality. Because if you remember, during Trump's first term, the Chinese were taking him very seriously. That was in 2018, and I was working at a think tank here in Beijing when Trump launched the first trade war. And I remember that during that time, part of our job was to read Trump's Twitter posts every morning and sometimes at night.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, because every time he negotiated with the Chinese toward an agreement, he would then tweet something totally different. It's like, "Oh, I'm going to tear this thing apart. I don't like this and that." And when he visited China before the trade war, he was showing that he was very willing to negotiate and things like that. And then, after he went back to the United States, he suddenly launched a trade war against China. So that's what the Chinese have found from our experience dealing with him for almost two terms, right?

We find that this person is not very serious in terms of his comments and his behavior as well. He often does things on impulse. Even his invasion of Iran was very poorly prepared. He was basically depending on this idea that, oh, if we kill Khamenei, the entire regime in Iran is going to fall. He has a lot of those very poorly prepared ideas. And the Chinese find that, for that reason, dealing with him seriously in a traditional diplomatic manner is very, very painful and not efficient at all. Because whatever you agree on with him, he's going to tear it apart very quickly and very awkwardly.

And there are also sources in the Western media showing that Trump largely just believes whatever the last person who talked to him told him. That was part of the reason why Netanyahu was able to trick him into this war with Iran. Basically, he talks to everyone, and whoever is the last person to talk to him has a big influence on him. He's like, "Okay, this makes sense," and he makes very quick decisions based on that. So, from the Chinese perspective, we find that we don't want to deal with him in a serious manner at all. So how about we just appease his very awkward personality and emotions so that we have more time to do whatever we are doing?

And we also find that, actually, if you look at China-U.S. dynamics right now, we are doing what Trump did to us in his last term. Whenever the two countries are discussing actual things, like a trade agreement and all of those things, the Chinese are very, very assertive, very strong in their stances. But when Trump comes, we welcome him very warmly, make him happy, and show that we still respect him and everything. And then, after he's gone, when the U.S. representatives negotiate

with the Chinese on specific issues, the Chinese become very hardcore again. So that's basically what Trump did to China in his first term. I think the Chinese actually learned from that and are using it on the United States at this moment.

#Pascal

That's quite interesting on several levels because, in a way, what China is doing is actually kind of similar to what Iran is doing, although with Iran, it's of course the missiles and the violence, right? Iran's basic strategy is: whatever you shoot at us, whatever you destroy of ours, we destroy something of equal value of yours. And if you inflict pain on us, we inflict pain on you, right, through the Strait of Hormuz.

#Sheng Zhang

And they try to create this reciprocity.

#Pascal

So in a sense, China is also trying to say, "Hey, if you bully us and hurt us, then we will do the same to you with, for instance, the tariff war and rare earth minerals. We can hurt you too. But if you're nice to us and you treat us kindly, then we will treat you even more kindly. We will cater to your emotions, and we will actually show you all of the nice things we have to offer." So this is part of it. And on the other hand, it's this idea that since this administration, or maybe the entire U.S. process, cannot be taken seriously anyhow, you just try to do the best you can at the moment. And there's this one thing: try to understand the other side correctly, right? In that sense, maybe the trilateral meeting is even a good example. You should keep your friends close, but your enemies even closer, in order to properly understand how they work—not just Trump alone, but the entire United States system. Is that about what's going on?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think so. I think so. Basically, we want to show Trump that we are not going to compromise on actual things, but we are willing to continue talking with the United States. And we're not only showing Trump, but showing the entire United States that we want to manage some sort of conflict. For example, if you look at the joint communiqué released by the three countries, it's very, very limited—just four or five points. And they're not very concrete. But there are some things we really focus on. For example, we should not fight a nuclear war. And that's something we put into the joint communiqué. And I think the Chinese are very serious about that. We want to avoid any sort of armed conflict, especially nuclear war, with the United States at this moment.

And there's another thing. I think a very large part of China's intention in hosting this convention is also to send some signals to neighboring and small countries, especially countries near China,

showing two things. One is that we are trying to manage this conflict with the United States. And the second thing is that the United States is, again, not a very reliable partner at all. And that's a signal we want to send through this meeting, because if you look at how Europe reacted to this meeting, they're extremely frustrated about it. They feel like, "Oh, Trump is meeting with Putin. They're selling out Ukraine," and things like that.

And you find that that's actually partly true: the Ukraine issue did not prevent Trump from entering this meeting with Putin. And the meeting was actually going quite well. Trump also enjoyed the conversation with Putin and his personal relationship with Putin and things like that. Similarly, if you look at what happened in the last few years, some neighboring countries or regimes are pro-U.S. By "regime," I mean Taiwan, because I refrain from calling that a country. But some are countries, let's say Japan and the Philippines. They're trying to invite more of a U.S. presence into East Asia with this idea of containing China and things like that.

But in this meeting, the Chinese show that, oh, we can actually very easily talk to Trump, and we talk to Trump as equals. If you compare how we talk to Trump with how Takaichi is singing in the White House, right? If you make that little comparison, you find that the Chinese are sending out a very powerful message, saying that we are actually equal to the United States and we deal with the United States as equals. And that is going to cause some concern in those pro-U.S. countries and regimes in the region. They feel like, oh, actually, could the United States one day sell us out? Because the United States apparently doesn't want to have a war with China either.

#Pascal

Unfortunately, in these places, in these satellite states, the ideology is so deep that, of course, they do not see the structural dependencies. Japan and the Philippines still think that they are partners and allies, when, in fact, you should understand by now, after Ukraine and after what happened with the Gulf states, that what you are is an expendable investment that is supposed to come due once push comes to shove. But to me, it seems that, especially within Japan, this lesson hasn't been thoroughly learned yet. The way that Takaichi especially was treated in China—how did you interpret that?

Because in the international media and a little bit of the Japanese media, I saw that the general view was that Takaichi was actually trying to be nice. She was trying to smile at everybody and be nice to Trump and to her host, China. But she was basically snubbed in the way she was received. How did you perceive that part? Because, I mean, Japan is not the most important country, of course, in this entire game. It's definitely the U.S., Russia, and China. But it is one of the more important ones in the region, especially if the United States ever wanted to seriously try to hurt China. It would have to do it through Japan and basically, you know, push Japan into a Ukraine-like position. Although it would probably start with the Philippines, Japan would be next in line. How do you see that?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think basically the Chinese are still very angry about Takaichi's famous—or infamous—statement on Taiwan. And there were a lot of discussions between the two countries after that statement. But to this day, Takaichi has refused to withdraw that statement.

#Pascal

On the other hand, she hasn't repeated it, right? Yeah, she hasn't repeated it, but she hasn't walked it back either. And that goes back to December 2025, so it's been almost a year now.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, almost a year. And during that time, there were some discussions, especially from the Japanese side. They wanted to set this issue aside. If you remember, I think two or three months after the statement, there was this delegation of Japanese members of parliament that went to Beijing. And they talked to Wang Yi. The idea they put forward was, "How about we release a joint communiqué reiterating our agreements from the 1970s, which would include recognition of the One China policy?" And Wang Yi was very, very firm on this issue. He was not interested. He said no. He said whoever caused the problem should solve it. Basically, he meant that Takaichi should make a clear statement on this issue. Making a joint communiqué on the One China policy with Japanese bureaucrats was not going to solve the issue.

And that's the attitude I think the Chinese still hold today. If you look at the APEC meeting, you see a lot of Japanese headlines saying, "Takaichi is talking to Chinese officials again." And who is that official? I think he's a minister of agriculture or something. Actually, the Chinese premier, Li Qiang, was supposed to be at that meeting. And I personally think it was a deliberate decision that Li Qiang was not there, because they don't want him to meet Takaichi. Because if you're in the same meeting room and Takaichi comes up to you, you cannot say, "Oh, I refuse to say hi to you," because China still cares about protocol. But they don't want high-ranking officials to talk directly to Takaichi at this moment.

#Pascal

So actually, the Chinese premier did not go to that meeting.

#Sheng Zhang

And instead, the minister of agriculture, I think, went to the meeting. And that's the person Takaichi shook hands with. And the Japanese media were putting this video of them talking to each other in all the headlines. So they're trying to send some sort of signal to domestic audiences in Japan, saying that, oh, our relationship with China is already improving, and that is going to have some sort of economic impact as well, right? Because China is right now refraining from selling rare earths to Japan, and China is not helping Japan in terms of the Hormuz oil crisis and things like that.

And there are other industrial exports to Japan as well. So basically, I think the Takaichi government is trying to send out the signal that our relationship with China is getting better. But the Chinese are preventing that from happening. And the Chinese don't want to be used by Takaichi in this domestic media propaganda campaign. So they specifically did not send Li Qiang to this meeting. Instead, they sent someone who's relatively less important to meet with Takaichi at that meeting.

#Pascal

I see. I see. It's quite interesting, though, if you compare these different levels of relationships and how they're being managed by China. On the one hand, we see the relationship with Russia: high-level, very respectful, and very, you know, in a sense, equal and warm, I would say. Then there's the relationship with Trump: trying to schmooze him and wine and dine him and so on, in order to make sure that he has no personal grudge, no personal reason to try to get tough on China. And with Japan, it's adversarial and almost top-down, in a sense. But the important thing to me is that I think China and Japan do take each other very, very seriously, right? Words matter a lot.

These few words that she uttered back in December mean a lot to China. And what China does and how China treats Takaichi mean a lot to Japan. So it's very, very different from how they treat the United States, right? As in, oh, whatever they say, you can't take them seriously anyway. So how do you think China is trying to approach these relationships? One of my basic arguments about international relations is that it's still, in essence, a bilateral game, right? You have to engage with each relationship on its own. You cannot just say, like, oh, China does X with other countries. No, it doesn't work like that. It deals with Japan as Japan, the US as the US, and Russia as Russia. Do you have any thoughts on this, on how to read Chinese foreign policy in this sense?

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, I think Chinese foreign policy is very bilaterally focused. I mean, China also engages in a lot of multilateral meetings and things like that. But after that, they would always try to talk to each country and have a very different policy toward each country, sometimes even on the same issue. For example, with the South China Sea territorial dispute, our policy toward Vietnam and our policy toward the Philippines were two very different ones, totally different ones on the same issue.

And if you want to understand Chinese foreign policy, you have to look at this very awkward but important jargon that China puts into all its different bilateral relations. You know, we have strategic partnerships, comprehensive strategic partnerships, and comprehensive strategic partnerships for a new era. And the highest one was with Pakistan. The name was “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership.” All-weather means whenever the weather changes in the international environment, we're still friends. Why that one?

#Pascal

Why does Pakistan get that kind of treatment? That baffles me.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, the funny thing is that if you look at Chinese history, like the history of the PRC, the PRC is actually very bad at controlling its smaller allies, like, very bad at doing that. For example, North Korea. We fought a war in Korea alongside North Korea, and then we had this phrase that we use to describe our bilateral relations: an "alliance forged in blood," the blood shed in the Korean War.

But still, during the Cold War, when the relationship between China and the Soviet Union was very bad, North Korea was very much on the Soviet side. And after that, you see that the Chinese didn't want North Korea to have nuclear weapons, but then they got nuclear weapons. Another case is Vietnam. Eventually, under Le Duan, we went to war with each other. So if you say that a great power controls its smaller allies, the Chinese were never able to do that. Compared to the United States, we were never able to do that.

#Pascal

Yeah, so in a sense, China does things and helps, and then thinks, "Oh, this should solve the issue, and now they must be grateful to us." And then the other country does what's good for them and not good for China. And China goes, "What?"

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, so the idea is that China deals with its smaller allies by basically playing the emotional card. It's like, "Oh, we helped you fight the Americans in the Korean War or in the Vietnam War. Could you be more grateful to us? And if you're not, we don't want to deal with you anymore, and we'll be very mad."

#Sheng Zhang

So that's it. It's a very...

#Sheng Zhang

Low level of maneuvering, let's say, if you compare that to what the Soviets did. The Soviets would actually have pro-Soviet factions in those countries and support those factions and things like that. The Chinese were never able to do that. So for that reason, you don't see China being diplomatically very close to any of its allies. They don't have that. And that's why the relationship with Pakistan is actually at the highest level in Chinese diplomatic messaging. Because we used to have closer relationships with North Korea and Vietnam, and those things did not work out.

And with Pakistan, the relationship is that, because Pakistan is relatively small and relatively remote from us, we don't have any conflict between the two countries. So it's okay to put the relationship at such a high level of partnership, and you don't feel betrayed. Because the last time we did that was with North Korea and Vietnam. And from the Chinese perspective—I'm not saying that this is objectively the only way to understand this—but from the Chinese perspective, they feel like, "Oh, we treated them so nicely, but we've been betrayed."

So after that, the Chinese right now are very unwilling to form any sort of alliance with other countries. They just want to pursue their own policies themselves. And with Pakistan, the point is that Pakistan would not really change Chinese policy in any significant sense. Pakistan is not going to drag China into a war with India or with any other country. So the Chinese feel like it's safe to recognize the relationship with Pakistan at the highest level. And Pakistan also provides a lot of emotional value to China, if you see it that way.

#Pascal

And that's actually quite a cute interpretation. But on the other hand, it might actually just be a repetition of the same pattern again. Because if China had something that it would like Pakistan to do or not to do, Pakistan at that point might just say, like, "You know…" Yeah, probably. But then China will just be like, "What, again?" Yeah. Although "all-weather" should still apply. But in this sense, this is also quite interesting, because what you're saying, I think, goes back to how China approaches its foreign relations.

China does not try to put its own people in place and subvert these other countries' political processes, which is, of course, something the United States does very, very strongly, and something even the Soviets tried to do to an extent, right? Basically, by educating people. Kim Il-sung was educated in Moscow and then sent back. So you send your own people to then control the guns, which are the source of power for these regimes. But China doesn't do that, actually. China still, to this day, doesn't try to infiltrate even its partners, one way or the other. It just tries to forge a relationship with them.

#Sheng Zhang

Is that it? I mean, I'm not trying to romanticize Chinese foreign policy too much, because we also tried to do this in the past. There are pro-China factions. Let's say there's this very famous Yan'an faction in North Korea. Basically, these were the people who were in Yan'an during the Second World War, and they were fighting the Japanese alongside China at that time. After that, they went back to North Korea and formed this Yan'an faction. And in Vietnam, especially in the North, we have something we call the Northern faction because they are often from the North.

#Pascal

And then they turned out to be more pro-China.

#Sheng Zhang

But the major distinction I want to make is that whenever those factions are in trouble, the Chinese often protest, but they lack the determination to actually intervene on those issues. I think it's the determination, not the capacity, because the Chinese actually can do that if they're serious. So if you look at the history of North Korea, what happened is that the Yan'an faction was later purged by Kim Il-sung, and the Chinese protested a lot. There was this case where some people from the Yan'an faction fled North Korea, went to Beijing, and talked to Mao Zedong and said, "Can you come and help?"

And Mao Zedong said, "Okay, we're going to help." And what he did to help was basically ask Kim Il-sung to come to Beijing and have a dialogue about it. And that didn't help. That didn't solve the issue. And the same thing happened in Vietnam when Le Duan was rising to power. He sidelined a bunch of the pro-China cadres and even purged some of them. The Chinese didn't have the determination to actually do what the Soviets did to Czechoslovakia or Hungary. That did not happen. And a very recent case, let's say, is when Kim Jong-un purged Jang Song-thaek, who was among the highest-ranking leaders at that time.

When Kim Jong-un ascended to power, Jang Song-thaek was regarded as a pro-China person. And then he was purged, and the Chinese didn't really do anything about that. There was very little the Chinese did. And when North Korea wanted nuclear weapons, the biggest threat China made was, "Oh, we're going to cut off our trade. We'll stop buying coal from you." And North Korea was like, "Okay, fine. If you don't buy coal from me, if my economy collapses, if my regime collapses, the Americans will come to your border. Enjoy that." And the Chinese were like, "Oh, well, that's terrible." And then, eventually, China basically compromised on this issue.

And even today, you see China is still like, "We have to keep North Korea functioning as a regime so that it doesn't collapse, cause a major humanitarian crisis that would send North Korean refugees flooding into China, or bring the Americans to the border at the Yalu River." When China is dealing with smaller countries, there are numerous cases where China has basically compromised. You would expect large countries to have more of a say, but that hasn't been the case when China is dealing with its quasi-allies. And I'm not making the argument that the Chinese don't want to do that.

I mean, the Chinese also do want to promote pro-China people in different countries. But they basically do that in one way. It's like, "Oh, if you're pro-China and you're in power, we would sign more economic deals with you so that during your term, you have more economic accomplishments, and supposedly people would support you more, and then you would stay in power." And if you look at how we dealt with Duterte, that was literally what happened. And right now, Duterte has been ousted, and he was sent to The Hague and all of those things.

The Chinese did not try to use stronger force to change this situation. The Chinese didn't say, "You can fly into Beijing," or try to take him to Beijing, protect him there, and send him back. But that's something that the Russians often do. Those pro-Russian leaders often get supported in that way. So the Chinese were not very interested in selling weapons to Duterte when he was in charge. And the Chinese know perfectly well that much of the Philippine army was infiltrated and controlled by the United States.

But during Duterte's time in power, the Chinese did not really make an effort to change that. For example, "Can you fire some army officials? Can you bring in some other ones who are purely pro-Duterte and pro-China?" Those things did not work out. So the Chinese idea was like, "Okay, if you are pro-China, we sign more economic deals with you. We give you more aid." And for that reason, I think China's control over its quasi-allies is very loose. And it's just a fact. I'm not saying that the Chinese are nicer compared to everyone else, but it's a fact that whenever we deal with quasi-allies, we often don't have control over those countries at all.

#Pascal

And you often see that, yeah. This is quite interesting. And here, of course, we need to remember that countries are not one-man operations. China is not Xi Jinping. The United States is not Donald Trump. I mean, the way countries act, how they implement policies, and what the actual impacts are depend on a very, very large system that has also developed historically. And what you're calling a fact, then, is the outcome of how the system works with these partners or these significant others. Two more things I want to talk about. First, the agreement that was signed in Shenzhen. I think we both agreed that these were pretty low-hanging fruit. On the one hand, there's the fourth point: that you don't want to fight a nuclear war. It cannot be won and must never be fought.

That's a very Russian way of phrasing this. That's why I interpret it as coming from the Moscow side. It also, to me, says that, okay, this is the one baseline we have: we don't want nuclear war. But, you know, if we have to have a non-nuclear war, we can talk about that. I mean, look, we don't want to go all the way up, but at a lower level, maybe we're fine with that. And if you look at what the Russians and the United States currently have—the proxy war in Ukraine—I mean, that seems to be something that both sides can live with in a very weird and sick sense. But the other points within that communiqué as well—I think about the fact that China agreed to say, "Well, we don't want the ICC. We all agree we don't like that institution." How did you interpret that?

#Sheng Zhang

I mean, the funny thing is that I think China, Russia, and the United States—none of them joined the ICC. But the very interesting thing is that, actually, in the early 2000s, China's attitude toward the ICC was a little bit different. The idea at that time was that we like this type of mechanism, but

we don’t want to join because the West can weaponize it against China on domestic issues. Let’s say they make up something about Xinjiang again, or issues like that, and then they can try to meddle in our domestic politics. And that was the attitude in the early 2000s.

It's like, we think this is a good mechanism, but we're concerned about it being dominated by the West, so we're not ready to join. And I think right now, after Russia-Ukraine, U.S.-Iran, and also Gaza, that attitude is gone. Like, right now, the new attitude is basically, “Oh, this entire thing is ridiculous, hypocritical, and useless.” Because basically, what the Chinese were worried about in the early 2000s came true during all three of those conflicts we just talked about. The West was basically using it one-sidedly. For example, they say, “Oh, we issued a warrant for Putin.” But they didn't put any sort of checks on the behavior of the Ukrainian right wing, and they didn't really care. And it's the same thing when they say, “Oh, we care about the issue in Gaza,” but they failed to actually accomplish anything.

Like, did they successfully arrest Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir? They did not. They just conduct these symbolic investigations. And so, for the Chinese side, it's very awkward. It's like, in their first investigation into the Gaza issue, they were basically saying, “Oh, we think Hamas are war criminals.” And then it was only after quite some time that they started to be harsher on Israel, saying, “Oh, the Israelis are also committing war crimes in Gaza,” and mentioning Netanyahu and this and that. So, from our perspective, it's very clear that they are following a very Western pattern and a form of political correctness, right? It's always like, whenever you say anything about Gaza in the West, you have to first say, “Oh, Hamas is a terrorist group.”

And then, “But what the Israelis are doing is not nice.” That's basically the pattern the ICC also followed. And I think that disappointed the Chinese a lot. And regarding Iran too, like, basically, with the U.S. invasion of Iran, you don't really see the ICC trying to bring any significant charges against the United States, against people in power in the United States. So, for that reason, the Chinese attitude right now is not like it was in the early 2000s: “Oh, we're not ready yet, but this is a good mechanism.” Right now, the idea is like, “Oh, this entire mechanism doesn't make any sense.”

It's basically used by Europeans in particular to do whatever they want to do. But they cannot really accomplish anything. And it's not just about people from the developing world; it's about people the West does not like, whether it's Palestinians, Iranians, Russians, or the Chinese. So, for that reason, I think the Chinese are definitely more sympathetic to Russia—not really to the United States, but to Russia in particular—on the ICC issue. And we just find it interesting that the United States wants to join this joint statement.

#Pascal

So, in a sense, the ICC issue is like, “Okay, dear ICC, too little, too late. Plus, one of our friends is already indicted by you. Plus, we can use it to provide emotional value to the United States. So, yeah, sure. Why not? This thing can be discarded.” Maybe one last point, because, you know, I care

a lot about the concepts that we use to frame stuff. I think “providing emotional value” might, especially in the West, be very quickly misunderstood as sucking up to Trump. Yeah. How do you think emotional value is different from that?

You know, another person who understood this quite well, I believe, was Shinzo Abe. When Trump first came into office back in 2016, Abe immediately flew over there and played a round of golf with him. And I think that was a stroke of genius because that's exactly how you provide emotional value. And Abe understood this intuitively very, very early on. And now China is at the point where they do that in order to approach this relationship. But I would argue it's different from sucking up. How do you view that?

#Sheng Zhang

I think the major difference between, let's say, our way of providing emotional value and sucking up is whether you really give the United States what it wants in terms of concrete interests. That's the major difference. That's also why I think we Chinese specifically learned how to deal with Trump from Putin, not from Takaichi, for example, right? Because they both make Trump happy. But after Takaichi danced in the White House, she basically agreed to whatever Trump dictated. Trump says, “Oh, don't buy Iranian oil.” She's like, “Okay, I won't buy Iranian oil.”

“Don't buy Russian oil.” “Okay, I won't buy Russian oil.” And meanwhile, Japan is in an energy crisis. And Trump says, “Okay, after you go back to Japan, solve the trade issue. Buy more American things.” And basically, she does whatever Trump wants. From the Chinese perspective, we think that's sucking up. Basically, you surrender on everything, and you treat yourself as a vassal state of the United States. And you basically give up all of your national interests and protocols. And another very important thing...

Whenever I talk to Chinese experts and government officials who deal with Japan-related issues, one thing the Chinese really detest is that Japan basically gives extraterritoriality to American soldiers. American soldiers rape people in Japan, in Okinawa and also on the main island of Japan, every year, and the Japanese don't get to try any of them. They're always sent back to the United States and tried there. Or they cause car accidents and kill people while driving drunk, and the Japanese aren't able to try them either. That's part of the reason why the Chinese leadership and society look down on Japan.

Because they feel like, “Oh, you guys are basically a colony of the United States, and you're not resisting. Normally, we think that people in colonies resist the colonial powers, but you guys are not even resisting that. So we don't take you seriously.” But in the case of Russia, what I was saying is that Putin provides a lot of emotional support to Trump and makes Trump happy. But what is happening on the front line is not something that makes Trump happy, right? It's not something that makes the United States happy. The Russian army is advancing on the front line, changing the border, and doing a lot of damage to U.S.-supported proxy wars and things like that.

So that's not making Trump happy at all. And it's the same thing with China. The best thing we give to Trump is that we find a bunch of kids to sing "YMCA" for him. But does that change the fact that we are trading with Iran? We're trading with Russia. We are supporting our own high-tech industry to compete with the United States. And because we're a socialist country, we give subsidies to state corporations to help them be better prepared to compete with the United States in terms of trade. And that didn't change any of that.

The most the Chinese are willing to do is basically those symbolic things. And we may be interested in buying more soybeans or beef from the United States. But that's it. When it comes to core interests, such as high tech and territorial integrity over Taiwan, for example, the Chinese are not negotiating. The Chinese are not making any compromises on that. And from my perspective, only if you don't sell out your national interests can you say that you are providing emotional value. For example, when Nixon came to China, that's what we did too, right?

#Pascal

This is highly interesting. If we had more time, I would make the argument that Japan is very good at pretending to give up what the other side wants, but it doesn't. But since we're running out of time, we have to cut that one short. But just one thing. So we have different approaches right now in international relations, right? We have Iran: talk tough, act tough. We have Russia and China: talk sweet, act tough. And we have Japan: talk sweet, act sweet, right? And we're going to see how this is going to work out over the long term. But again, thank you very much, Sheng, for this comprehensive overview. This was very insightful. If people want to find your work, where should they go?

#Sheng Zhang

I have already sent you the link to the article about the China-Russia-US trilateral meeting. That's published on a Turkish media platform called Halici, which I'm going to contribute to regularly for a long time. That article was actually written before the summit, and I predicted that the Chinese were basically going to play with this emotional thing while not making any compromises on their actual interests. And that's basically what happened. I was very happy to see that you don't see China signing any actual deal with Donald Trump. Basically, we make him happy and let him go. And he is expected to be silent for quite a while. So you can read about the specific details of that in the article.

#Pascal

Wonderful. Then let's see whether this strategy works out for China or not. I'm going to link to your profile on Harici so people can follow you there. Harici are the good people in Istanbul around Tunç Akkoç, who is also a co-organizer of the East-West Forum. These are great initiatives for independent analysis. Sheng Zhang, thank you so much for your time today.

#Sheng Zhang

Yeah, thank you very much.