

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA: What does a global China mean for the U.S. and the world?
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(Music)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. Today is the first of five special episodes in a week-long takeover of the Cafeteria by our Global China project. It's a multi-year endeavor drawing on expertise across the Brookings Foreign Policy program that aims to understand China's regional and local ambitions, and to look not just at how China has changed on the world stage but also where the U.S.-China relationship is headed.

I'm glad to pass the mic for the special series into the capable hands of Lindsey Ford, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Foreign Policy. You can learn more about her background and current research in a recent episode about climate change.

As always, you can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter, @policypodcasts. To get information about and links to all of our shows, including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings trade podcast; The Current; and our Events podcast. If you like the show, please go to Apple Podcasts and leave us a review. It helps others find it. And, now, here's Lindsey Ford.

FORD: Thanks, Fred. I'm excited to be guest hosting a 5-day takeover of the Cafeteria Podcast. I'm still not quite sure how somebody decided to turn over the reins to the new girl right away. So, Fred, hopefully I will return your podcast in good working order in 5 days' time.

As Fred mentioned, we're going to be doing a 5-day series of discussions around the new Global China project that the Foreign Policy program is launching. In each episode, I'm going to be talking with different scholars who are contributing to the project, digging in on some new research papers that are going to be rolled out over the next few weeks.

Today's episode is extra fun for me. I have two longtime friends and colleagues here in the studio with me -- Ryan Hass and Tarun Chhabra. Ryan and Tarun are both fellows in Brookings' Foreign Policy program, and they're co-leading this project along with our colleague Rush Doshi who, unfortunately, couldn't be here with us today. So, guys, welcome.

HASS: Thank you, Lindsey.

CHHABRA: Thanks for having us.

FORD: So, we're going to talk about Brookings' new Global China project, which is going to be a foreign policy- wide effort that's going to rope in a huge array of scholars over the next couple of years. So, to kick off, just tell me a bit about your goals for the project. What are some of the big questions and maybe voids in the China debate that you really hope this project is going to address?

HASS: Lindsey, as I think about this project, the way that I approach it, I think Brookings is the largest or one of the largest think tanks in the world. China's rise is the biggest story in the international relations world. And, so, it's a question of are we going to be able to harness the deep bench of talents that exists on virtually every issue in the human condition at Brookings to grapple with this existential question of what are the implications of China's rise.

And, so, the hope is that, through this project, we'll be able to take an all-encompassing, empirical assessment of what China's trying to do, where it is trying to do it, what it is hoping to achieve, what happens, what are the implications if it succeeds or if it fails, and how can the United States respond to this challenge?

So, hopefully, over the course of this exercise, we will help develop a baseline of understanding, grounded in empirical research on China's ambitions that will help inform the

public and the policy debate about how to respond to China.

CHHABRA: I would just add to what Ryan said, that I think the EEC, the debate about China's global influence playing out in a couple of ways. One is trying to identify what China's grand strategy is in the world. What are they trying to accomplish? What are its ambitions in the world? What means are they employing toward those ends?

But, not a lot of people can actually engage in that debate in a really substantive way, unless they're sinologists. And, we do have sinologists here and we will be enlisting some of them to address that question. But, what we can do is to, for a moment, just put aside that question and say there will continue to be some debate on that. Hopefully, we'll advance the ball in some ways, whether that's looking at China's ambition in East Asia, whether China wants to replace the United States as a global hegemon.

But, what we can do with many of our other scholars who haven't necessarily been focusing on China is, tell us what is China doing in your part of the world, or the functional area that you've been studying, and how have you seen China's role and involvement and influence shift over time, so that we can come at the debate another way and say we may continue to debate elements of China's grand strategy, either regionally or globally, but we'll put together, I think, a pretty compelling picture of what is happening in the world.

And, it may be that some of that is happening through economic incentives, some of that is happening through demand, through trade with China, or influence, or security concerns, whatever it might be. But, that's going to produce a different world on its own, even if we can't settle the strategy question. So, we're trying to kind of marry both of those, to come up with a compelling picture of how the world will be different, and then for U.S. policymakers to help figure out how we respond.

FORD: Great. Tarun, talking about bringing in a wider range of scholars who have a lot of different backgrounds, different perspectives, I think, is something that's a really important part of creating a more well-rounded debate about China policy right now. And, one thing I like about Brookings is not just that there's such an enormous bench of really talented people to work with but that Brookings really tries to encourage a lot of debate and intellectual discussion between scholars with different viewpoints.

So, I wanted to ask you guys about this, because you two actually, I think, have come to studying China policy in different ways. And, Ryan, you sort of came up as the traditional Asia and China scholar in the regional lane, and, Tarun, you've come at this from the grand strategy, sort of a functional perspective. So, how do you think that has shaped for each of you the way that you think about China policy?

CHHABRA: I think we'll continue to have an interesting debate about these questions. Hal Brands, a friend of ours, who teaches at Hopkins down the road, just published a piece that I think a lot of folks are debating right now. In that piece, Hal argues, you know, the functionalists got it right before, but now we really need the sinologists, right, to figure out what our policy should be.

FORD: And, by the way, there's been a lot of back-and-forth fistfights between these sinologists and the functionalists over the years.

CHHABRA: That's right. And, it's playing out, obviously, in the debate over America's engagement policy with China as well. So, you see this playing out in a number of ways. I came to this originally working with you, right, at the Pentagon. I think the bottom line and the reason why we need a project like this is that China is now everybody's business. It doesn't matter whether you're working in Europe, whether you're working, obviously, in East Asia, if

you work on gender issues, if you work on climate. There's no way you can put yourself in a hole and pretend that China's global influence doesn't matter to you.

And, so, this has to be a conversation amongst all of us, and we need the depth of expertise that China hands have. We all need to become more educated about China's ambitions, about China's strategy. And, similarly, I think it's important for sinologists to kind of also grapple with how quickly China's policy has evolved, how quickly the reaction to it is evolving, and also that history and theory also have something to contribute to the challenge.

HASS: I agree with everything that Tarun said. Just to offer my own experience for the conversation, like you said, I came at the China issue through 2 years of full-time intensive language study, 4 years in the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, 4 years at the White House working on China policy, and several years here at Brookings. So, I have had China on my mind for a while.

And, I have tried to understand myself how it has affected my own thinking about the issues at hand, and I guess I have two reflections. The first is that I have developed a bit of an understanding of the image that China wants to present to the world, of its steely strength, of its unbending rise, and just of its ascendance. But, I've also seen the messy reality that exists underneath the façade, inside China.

And, I think that the picture -- some of the nuance sometimes gets lost when we're talk in big, abstract terms about strategic issues related to China. So, I think it's important to try to keep that and protect some of that nuance. The other thing that I have taken away from the experience is a firsthand appreciation of the ruthlessness with which the Chinese Communist Party is determined to hold onto its grip on power.

When I was in RMC in Beijing, one of my jobs was to report on developments in Xinjiang. And, so, this is not an abstract issue for me, this is a personal issue, because I've seen

up close, I have friends, I understand what has happened, what is happening. And, so, on one hand, I may be a little less intimidated about the story of China's rise, because I've seen some of the details and messiness that is taking place in China.

On the other hand, I think I, through my experience, developed a pretty sober understanding of the implications of China's rise and how aggressive they can be in pursuit of their interest.

CHHABRA: I think one way that this has come through in some of the debate is, how we prioritize our interests, right? And, I think everyone would agree that having a relationship with China in which the likelihood of war is not terribly high is an interest of all of ours. But, we also have other interests, and, in my view, I think Beijing has done a good job in preying, to some degree, on our desire to have a stable relationship and been quite effective in getting us to make concessions in order to preserve some degree of stability in the relationship.

And, so, I think that you now see a number of people arguing that we just have to accept more friction in this relationship, because many other interests that we have, whether it comes to economics or security or values, have been infringed and will likely to be even more so in the future, and some degree of stability in the relationship is going to be lost as a consequence.

FORD: So, let me pick up on that for a second, because you said China has, fairly successfully at times, played different U.S. interests off each other because our bilateral relationship touches on so many different issue areas at this point, and because it is a global kind of bilateral relationship.

So, you see this idea of accepting more friction coming out even more strongly. This is basically the premise of we're in an era of great power competition or strategic competition.

But, one of the challenges, I think, of figuring out how you compete effectively is that this challenge of how do we prioritize our interests and what we really care about doesn't go away, just because we're simply in a more competitive era.

Now the question is, where do you prioritize where the United States needs to compete, and what are sort of the different lanes of competition that the U.S. and China are likely to be engaging in? Where do you draw the line between cooperative competitive and what kind of competition matters most? So, how do you guys think about that challenge in terms of where's competition going to be more vigorous between the U.S. and China, and what should our priorities be when we think about competing effectively?

HASS: Well, I think it's the essence of what this project hopefully will help illuminate. But, just at the outset, I would say that on security issues there are pretty well-defined boundaries of where our interests intersect with China's. So, on the issue of Taiwan, we have a very clear contrast in what we're trying to achieve, what Beijing is trying to achieve.

On China's territorial challenges with our allies, there is a very clear division of where our interests are and where China's are. Where it begins to get murkier is in new domains, such as cyberspace, AI, but also, I think, on technology issues. And, my argument is that technology is really going to be at the core of much of the competition that takes place between the United States and China in the decades to come.

CHHABRA: I agree with that, and I think that's in part because it will play such a prominent role in economic growth and also because of the way that it's entwined with values. Ryan mentioned Xinjiang earlier. Obviously the question of surveillance is not just a domestic challenge. It's not just the oppression of the Uighurs in Xinjiang. It's the export of that technology abroad, and it's the fact that there are some competitors who manufacture

equipment like that, but nothing on the scale of what China develops.

And, among liberal democracies, we haven't yet come to a consensus around what our norm should be around that kind of technology in many instances, so that we don't come to the table with a clear alternative. So, I think we shouldn't understate the degree to which some of this really is an ideological competition, to some degree. Whether or not we want it to be that is another question, and whether or not there's an effort to export ideology is a different question. But, the way that it's playing out, I think, has big implications for our values.

FORD: So, let's talk about ideology for a second. Certainly, there have been a lot of comparisons, contrasts between the U.S.-China relationship, U.S.-Russia relationship in the Cold War. Certainly, in the Cold War ideology was a big aspect of the competitive dynamics between the U.S. and Russia. How much do you see that as a competitive element of the U.S.-China relationship today?

CHHABRA: Well, I personally think it's a big piece of it, because it's not necessarily about whether you're imposing your form of government at gunpoint. It's more about whether you are exporting a suite of technology, economic system, and values altogether that are in some ways self-reinforcing.

It's not so much about whether the Chinese Communist Party is wanting to export its model. It's more about the demand, in the world, in autocracies, in wavering democracies for the equipment, the capital, and the costs that come with that that China is willing to provide, juxtaposed with a sense of crisis or at least weakness right now among the world democracies, the crisis of confidence at a minimum that makes us more worried about not necessarily places where we thought we would be promoting democracy but places where we're concerned about defending democracy.

So, I think it's a big part of it. I think many will argue that we shouldn't overplay it. But, it's hard, I think, to understand why we are where we are right now with Beijing, unless you understand that a lot of the mistrust that we have is grounded, I think, in big, ideological differences, first and foremost, really is what our conception is of human rights.

FORD: Ryan?

HASS: Well, I do think that this is an important issue for us to examine. And, I think that it's important that we do it with precision. Yes, I agree that China, through its actions, perhaps more by default than by design, is creating a model that others can replicate. It's creating an alternative to liberal democracy.

It is exporting certain technologies that other authoritarian governments or wannabe authoritarian governments can use to suppress dissent. It is setting an example through the use of policies that it is developing on cyber issues and other issues that can be put on the bookshelf and used by others in ways that are inimical to our interests.

I guess where I would encourage a bit of sobriety is on the question of are we in an existential, ideological battle with China? Because, that creates undertones to Cold War comparisons, which, I think create poor historic analogies that could lead to poor policy decisions as a consequence.

The reality is that China doesn't have a model that anyone wants to emulate. It's not popular in Hong Kong, it's not popular in Taiwan, it's not popular in Singapore, ethnic Chinese societies, nor is it anywhere else in the world. And, it's really the product of a unique set of circumstances that exist only in China. So, yes, I think that we should be vigilantly studying and examining this issue, but doing so in a rigorous, empirical way without dry and sweeping conclusions preemptively.

CHHABRA: And, just so you know, you'll have a chance, Lindsey, I know, to interview a number of our contributors to this series. But, I think this question comes through, to some degree, and, so, the papers that are being released and this tranche, whether it's David Dollar's paper on the Belt and Road Initiative, where David really takes more of an economic focus, right, when he looks at BRI, whereas, on the other hand, if you look at Dan Byman's paper with Israa Saber, I think that paper kind of really shows how ideology is playing into China's conception of counter-terrorism and the way that's being exported, right, and what the implications might be for the rest of the world.

FORD: Yes, it's a really interesting conversation. If I hear what you guys are saying correctly, Ryan, I think that one of the points you're trying to make is, the Cold War comparison is perhaps inaccurate in the sense that China doesn't have broad revolutionary ambitions to export the communist ideology in the same way that Russia did, let's say, in the 1960s.

But, Tarun, I think the point that you're trying to make is, China may not be revolutionary when it comes to its ideology, but it most certainly is revisionist, and that will still have an impact whether or not there is a broad ideological design. Because, certainly, it is looking to revise a lot of the mechanisms and systems within the global order that will make it harder for democracies to thrive.

So, whether that's technological tools or whether that's altering institutional rules, at the end of the day, those (inaudible) add up to something that may very much have an ideological impact that's detrimental to U.S. interests.

CHHABRA: I agree with that, and I believe that in some ways China's challenge ideologically is potentially more serious than the Soviet one, in part because they're not

spreading it through force in the same way, and because they have many more tools at their disposal, especially their economic power and their understanding of what network power looks like, which now is being deployed through technology. So, in some ways, my view is that we can be like a frog in a slowly (Inaudible) pond, and that makes it a little bit more challenging.

I just would say on the Cold War -- and I'm interested to see how a lot of our contributors handle this -- I think there's plenty to be learned from the Cold War. I wouldn't throw it out entirely. I think, for example, I've been in some discussions recently where people who looked deeply at the Cold War export control regime are applying some lessons today about how the current situation is different, whether we'll continue to see the same kinds of alliance dynamics or different ones, understanding, of course, that in many ways they're more interdependent with China, and China's been willing to weaponize that interdependence.

And, similarly, I would argue we're still in the early phases of this competition. And, so, because, to some degree, intentions and capabilities are not as clear, I think there are some analogies to the early fifties that are helpful to us in figuring out how, both, to maintain strategic stability where we can, but also not necessarily to have inflated expectations for how quickly we're going to be able to come to a modus operandi in some domains of competition.

FORD: Yeah, it's a good point. I mean, I think simply because it's not a one-for-one historical analogy doesn't mean nonetheless there are lessons you ought to be learning from previous experiences. I happen to agree that I think that actually revisionism is probably more difficult to address than revolutionary intent. We know how to handle revolutions. We've seen this before. But, China's basically playing both an inside and outside game, and I'm not sure we've quite had to contend with a challenge like that before.

So, I want to talk about Chinese foreign policy for a second. And, more specifically, you mentioned at the beginning, Tarun, thinking about the drivers of China's foreign policy, its ambitions, how we ought to understand them. And, so, one thing I want to get at, I guess, is the question of how much leaders matter.

There's been a lot of conversation in recent years about Xi Jinping specifically and how he's sort of taken Chinese foreign policy perhaps in the direction that looks different than Hu Jintao or looks different than maybe what Americans expected. And, there's some debate about that. I guess the question I have is, to what degree is that true?

And, I know the project put together some papers recently by some younger authors that really dug in on this issue, I thought, in a good way. But, is what we're seeing in China's sort of more assertive foreign policy, more active global presence, is this really just what rising powers do, what we ought to expect from a large authoritarian, rising country, or does it actually reflect the imprint of Xi Jinping in a specific way? How much has his individual leadership mattered in terms of the turn that we've seen in Chinese foreign policy in the last few years?

HASS: Well, it's a great question, Lindsey. And, my view, having lived in Beijing for the Hu Jintao era and being at the White House for the first part of the Xi Jinping era, is that Xi Jinping is different. He has added a different leadership personality to China's foreign policy. He is much more comfortable stoking nationalism. He is much more willing to take risks. He is much more tolerant of friction, including with the United States, than his predecessor or predecessors were. At the same time, it's important to remember that many of these features of Chinese foreign policy pre-dated Xi Jinping.

FORD: Yeah, I think Rush had actually a great paper on this, I think.

HASS: He had a wonderful paper. He clearly laid out that use of economic coercion pre-dated Xi Jinping, assertiveness on territorial issues pre-dated Xi Jinping. Many of the projects that now form the constellation of the Belt and Road Initiative began before Xi Jinping took office.

So, in other words, it's important that we not exaggerate the impact that Xi Jinping has had on the overall trajectory of Chinese foreign policy, because it's a much more complicated story than the personality of one individual. For me, the inflection point wasn't 2012 when Xi Jinping entered office, it was 2008. 2008 was the global financial crisis and the period during which Beijing hosted the Olympics and won the most gold medals of any country in the world.

It was a period of pride inside China. And, I think that the lesson that they took away was, one, we don't need to pay as close of attention to following America's lead on everything that we recommend, because we were going through the global financial crisis and our brand had severely been dented, but two, China also doesn't need to be so modest about pursuing its own ambitions. And, from 2008 until now, I think that we've seen a clear progression of events that have reinforced that view.

FORD: Tarun, what about you?

CHHABRA: I agree with it. I highly recommend that series of papers that was really the first installment in this project. And, one more paper that kind of illustrates this is Andrew Chubb's on what China's been doing in the South China Sea, where he shows it's hard to build island-building vessels without a little bit of planning. It's hard to buy them off the shelf.

I think this matters in a sense that -- let's suppose there were turmoil, right, in the CCP leadership, and let's suppose Xi weren't to serve out for the rest of his life and we had a new

leader, I do think then you would have a lot of people in the United States who would say, you know what, let's reset. Let's go back. We can try this again.

FORD: We'd love to hit reset.

CHHABRA: Yeah, we love the reset, don't we? And, I think that would be a huge mistake. Should we seize an opportunity to come back to the table and be clear about our red lines and what could happen if we stay on the current course? Absolutely. In hopes of a better outcome, there's no doubt about that.

But, I think hoping for a reset in the way that we did with Russia, for example, I think would be a big mistake, precisely because of a lot of the evidence that was laid out in this paper series.

FORD: Great. Well, guys, this has been fascinating. I'm really looking forward to the project and the papers that are coming out shortly and the rest that will roll out over the next couple years. Let me just leave you with a final question, I guess. If there's one thing, if you had to pick one issue or question that you really think is missing right now from sort of the debate happening around U.S.-China policy, what would you say -- what do you think that would be?

HASS: I hope that through this series we are able to provide a bit more definition around the question of what are China's ambitions, and how do they impact our own? And, through that, I think that it will become clearer what path we should take going forward.

CHHABRA: I think there has been some writing on what our endgame should be, what we're trying to achieve in our policy toward China. I think we could have a more robust debate about that and really be clear about what the options are. But, I think we should do it with an assessment like this in our arsenal before we kind of conclude which direction from which it

might be hard to turn back, in some ways, we decide to take.

FORD: Guys, thanks so much for joining me. This has been fun. We'll do it again.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Eowyn Fain. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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