



***The Beijing Brief* podcast
The Brookings Institution**

“Will China replace America on the world stage?”

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Episode Summary:

America’s leading role in the world is eroding under the second Trump administration, raising questions about how China will position itself in the future global order. “We blew it,” says historian and Senior Fellow Robert Kagan in conversation with Ryan Hass and Jon Czin on the latest episode of *The Beijing Brief*. Kagan examines what this could mean for China's ambitions and behavior in the international system.

KAGAN: There's a lot of talk about China running the world. China can't run the world unless it can at least run its own hemisphere, or at least its own region.

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HASS: Hello, you're listening to *The Beijing Brief* from the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm Ryan Hass, director of the China Center, and *The Beijing Brief* is a biweekly podcast focused on unpacking the forces shaping the U.S.-China relationship, as well as China's political, economic, and technological ambitions. And I'm joined today by my co-host, Jon Czin.

CZIN: Great to be here.

HASS: We are also joined by Bob Kagan, but we will get to that in a moment. First, just to set this up, for decades, American foreign policy has rested on a basic assumption that the United States should play a leading role in maintaining the international order and play a leading role on the world stage.

And today, I think in the United States, it's safe to say that that assumption is under increasing debate. Americans are questioning the cost of global leadership, allies are wondering whether Washington remains committed, and China is increasingly presenting itself as a influential global actor.

So what we want to dig into today with Bob is what happens as the United States reassesses its role in the world? Does history offer us any guidance? And as American leadership becomes less certain, how is China going to react? Is China going to be prepared or even interested in playing a larger role on the world stage?

CZIN: So with us today to discuss all these questions is Bob Kagan, who is a senior fellow here at the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology at Brookings. And he's one of America's foremost historians of foreign policy thinking. He has written extensively on U.S. grand strategy and the international order, including *Rebellion: How Anti-Liberalism Is Tearing America Apart Again*, *The World America Made*, *The Jungle Grows Back*, which was a staple of my commute this spring, thanks, Bob, and my personal favorite, *Dangerous Nation* from about 20 years ago.

So Bob, it's a pleasure to have you here on the show. Thanks so much for joining us.

KAGAN: Well, thanks. A pleasure for me too.

[1:55]

HASS: So Bob, let's, let's start out with Iran. You've helped really sort of provoke and start a initiative at Brookings that examines the implications and fallout of of the war in Iran. The project is called "Blowback: How the Iran War May Change the World." Can you share with us what, what prompted this project and what learnings we've taken from it so far?

[2:14]

KAGAN: Well, in in my mind, this is part of a a a broader effort to sort of really look at where things may be heading now that we are in a period of what I regard as probably radical change rather than incremental change, that largely because of American actions, we're having a real redistribution of power, real questions raised about security by a lot of nations around the world that they have to address.

And the Iran war, as it turns out, is, is a perfect example of this because the likely outcome of the Iran war as seems right now, is that we're gonna have a very contested Strait of Hormuz at the very least, probably a stronger, more confident Iran at the end of this. And what does that mean for the rest of the world? And that's what this project took a look at.

And I would say just for the purposes of our conversation today, you know, some of the more obvious but also very striking aspects of it are what does, what does that do to to the Asian nations who are so dependent on oil and gas and other things coming out of the Persian Gulf? What do they do if it is not necessarily going to be available in the same way? Because the United States had been the guarantor of international waterways and is now clearly both not necessarily willing, but also potentially not able to maintain that. So what do other nations do in that situation?

And I think that's gonna be one of the drivers of policy for countries like Japan and other countries in the region.

[3:44]

CZIN: So as Ryan alluded to at the outset, so much of what's driving this sequence of events is this debate that's going on internally in the United States about our place in the world. And at the core of it seems to be this ambivalence about do we want this mantle that we've so long assumed since the end of World War II?

And so we want to get your take on what do you think is driving that ambivalence? And do you think that Trump is the symptom of this, or is he the cause? Is he the one driving this? And then lastly, the question that I get most frequently, especially from foreign diplomats and observers, is, is this ephemeral, or is this going to be enduring? Is this the new normal?

[4:16]

KAGAN: Well, those are all really important questions, and I hope I, I can approximate an answer.

I mean, I think there are two things to be said. One is that the trend toward Americans growing ambivalent about their role in the world has been going on since the end of the Cold War. I mean, I think most Americans, even many people in the national security community believe that American policy had been mostly focused on containing the Soviet Union and international communism, and that when the Soviet Union fell and international communism ceased to be a threat, that it was unclear why the United States should continue to play that role.

And so we've seen, I would say, weakening support for the same level of large global involvement that we had after World War II and during the Cold War. And you could see that in the Obama administration, you could see it in the Biden administration.

However, if you look at the history of American attitude towards the world, it's never a straight line. It's always an oscillating line. And we have gone through, obviously, periods like this in the past where after World War I, the American people decided they didn't want to play that role in the world, and they didn't for twenty years. And yet, as the world began to fall apart around them, they ultimately returned to that.

I think that would have been the normal pattern in this situation, too, and I was beginning to think that, you know, if if we were on one of those oscillating waves, that the curve had begun to go up as Americans were growing more concerned about Russia and China.

But, and this is where Trump comes in. So yes, to some extent, Trump's foreign policy is a symptom of the ongoing trend, but he introduces something that's completely different, and I think maybe people are failing to see how different it is. Whatever you might say about Obama and Biden and their, you know, whatever lacking they may have had in foreign policy, there was never any question about whether they were committed to the American role. Obama may have not have been the most enthusiastic supporter of Europe, but he was a supporter of Europe ultimately. And Biden, I think, you know, responded to Ukraine the way someone would respond if if you thought the United States had an important global role to play.

Trump comes in with a totally different attitude. Not only does he not want to support this world order, which he has regarded as a sucker's bet for the United States, but he's also ideologically not in line with the liberal world order because his whole presidency is fundamentally and avowedly anti-liberal. And if you look at American foreign policy now, it isn't in support of liberal democracy around the world. It's more likely to support anti-liberal populist movements in Europe and elsewhere.

And and that's why I think it's important to see this not as a continuing incremental change in American foreign policy, because I think that incremental change might have started going in the other direction. This is a radical change. This is a sharp break. It's what, it's what Mark Carney says. It's a breach in the system, and it's a quite deliberate breach. And so, that to me is what is creating the drama and is what is going to create the drama of international relations going forward.

[7:21]

HASS: And do you feel like there's fertile ground in the United States to sustain this breach beyond 2028?

[7:27]

KAGAN: I do, actually. That's a, also a good question, and I, and I think the Iran war has probably had the effect of driving even harder the the sort of tendency toward isolationism. And I think that even if the Democratic Party were to regain the White House in '29, this is not Dean Acheson's Democratic Party. At the very least, it's a

deeply divided Democratic Party. It's got a strong, what I would regard as a left isolationist element, which is not just about how we don't like Israel, and it's not just about how we don't want to be in the Middle East, but has the spillover effect of do we want to play this role in the world? Do we want to pay for the necessary defense budgets that would allow us to play this role in the world?

And that doesn't even take into account the fact that if there's a Democratic president, you're gonna have a Republican opposition, which I think the Republican Party is going to go in the JD Vance direction rather than in the sort of Mark Thiessen direction, if you will.

And so so what I do think is you're gonna have two very powerful isolationist movements in the left and the right. It's gonna make it very hard for the United States to sort of do a 180 from where we've been. And that doesn't even get into the question of the tariffs, which are not gonna be so easy to lift, even if we think they were a bad idea because to some extent the economy will be dependent on them. And so I think that anyone who's expecting a sort of snapback by the United States in 2029 is deluded.

[8:54]

HASS: Well, you left a lot of room for ambiguity in your thoughts there. But but I, I do, I am very persuaded by your observation that there's more distance between the center and the far left and the far right than there is between Democrats and Republicans. I think that's, that's the fault line that exists as it relates to foreign policy today.

But before we dive deeper into the current moment, I want you to put on your historian hat for a moment, because you and I have had some really interesting conversations over the years about the patterns of revisionist powers. And we've talked a lot about pre-World War II Germany as well as Japan after the Meiji Restoration.

What common patterns do you take away from, from really analyzing those two countries and others that you might want to add? What historical lessons should we draw from them?

[9:40]

KAGAN: Well, those two countries in the in the post-World War I period regarded themselves as the have-not powers, which meant basically that the world order was established in the case of Germany, on its carcass, and in the case of Japan, without their participation.

And so a lot of the drama of the '20s and '30s are Germany and Japan trying to reorient the world in a way that is more favorable to what they regard as their interest than the than the post- World War I settlement

And I think that's basically what's been going on with Russia and China. They also were have-not powers. They also had very little say. I I think Soviet Union had more say, but nevertheless not to the degree that they wanted in how the world was set,

and especially how the world evolved after that. And they lived in a world in which the United States was dominant, and it had allies on their borders and who were constraining their development.

So, their goal has been what all revisionist powers' goal is, is to try to create what all great powers both crave and in some ways is the definition of a great power, which is a sphere of influence, which is making sure that your neighborhood, at the very least, is under control, because that is a prerequisite to global power.

I, I don't mean to get diverted here, but I mean, there's a lot of talk about China running the world. China can't run the world unless it can at least run its own hemisphere, or at least its own region. so that has been the task for both Russia and China.

And you know, the thing about rising powers is that as their power grows, their sense of justice and entitlement also changes. And this is true of the United States as well. When the United States grew in power at the end of the 19th century, it started looking around the world saying, "Hey, there are certain things out here that we would like to see shaped in a different way." So it's, it's very natural.

Everything China has been doing is is very typical of revisionist powers, and the only question for revisionist powers is how accommodating is the international environment? And that's why I think when we look at China going forward and try to judge its behavior, and maybe this is where you and I sometimes have a little disagreement, I I think that China's behavior is going to change as the world system changes. They have been constrained by the sort of cohesiveness of the American liberal world order with all its alliance and security structures.

As those structures begin to disintegrate, China will be less constrained, but also may find itself having to take on a greater role simply because the United States is now not doing things that it used to do. And I mean, just as a perfect example of this is what about the Persian Gulf? I'm sure it's true that China doesn't want to become a big, necessarily right now, big player, but if if their oil supply depends on it, you know, you begin to wonder, and that's true of Japan and and other countries as well.

[12:39]

CZIN: It's interesting Because it kind of underscores to me the fact that we're even having this debate that we were talking about earlier in the United States about do we want this mantle? It's almost a luxury of our incumbency as a great power. Right? Yeah. It's almost like the apotheosis of our bourgeois bohemianism. Right? This is how you know you've really arrived. Whereas for China and Russia in particular, it's not a luxury. Right? They see it as a necessity.

Which segues to my next question. I mean, do you see China capitalizing then on this moment if there is this opportunity as we struggle in the Middle East? Because I think this is part of the debate you and Ryan have having a little bit is we don't really see them necessarily moving into to the Persian Gulf and trying to to seize the mantle. So what do you think is going on there? Do you think it's a mistake that they're making, a simple miscalculation? How does it look from your vantage?

[13:21]

KAGAN: Complicated is how it looks from my vantage because, you know, on the one hand, it isn't yet clear, although I think it has become clear in recent weeks, that the United States basically has no answer to the to the strait problem. And so there certainly has not been any particular need for China to to jump in. And of course, China's relationship with Iran is such that China's oil supplies do get out, you know, and they've made the the decisions that they've made up until now. But in, but but looking ahead, I just don't know whether that will be sustainable from their point of view.

But then there's another question, and this is another question where I just don't think I really know the answer, and that's on Taiwan. Obviously, the Chinese preference would be that Taiwan will ultimately just see reason and accept some form of unification. I think that that it's possible for Xi to believe that Trump will make that easier by being clearly an unreliable partner of Taiwan, and Taiwan will have to think about their plan B.

On the other hand, the Chinese have felt that way for 20 years. And there have been many times when they thought that this was when the Taiwanese were gonna play ball, and I'm not sure the Taiwanese really ever want to play ball, so from the Chinese point of view.

So then that raises the question if you're Xi, right now the United States and the international order are in disarray and getting more so. You can't be sure it's gonna stay that way. I personally don't think the United States is gonna snap back in 2029, but Xi can't know that. He may assume the United States will go back to being what it had been in the past. In which case you could say he has a window of opportunity in which to take advantage of the disarray in the global system and the evident weakness of the United States.

And by the way, I would say the Iran war would be more of an incentive than a disincentive to China since we've depleted our capacities and stripped the Western Pacific sort of bare in order to deal with this. So I would say if he were in that kind of aggressive mode, and pushing back in the other direction, he saw what happened in Ukraine, he's seen what happened in Iran. Some of these things don't go as well, and maybe it's easier just to wait for the Americans to just keep screwing up and and they'll take advantage of it.

But if you had to make me bet right now, I don't know which way I would bet because I could see the argument for both of them. Certainly from Putin's point of view, I would say this is the time to strike, you know, at at at the weakest moment. But for Xi it may be a different calculation.

[15:49]

HASS: I think there are two factors for Xi Jinping that may complicate the calculation. The first is that he has his own politics. He has a Party Congress coming up next year, and he doesn't necessarily welcome the idea of instability or volatility in the run-up to his effort to get a fourth term.

The second factor is I think that the Chinese are deeply convinced that the United States is just in a period of steady decline. And that their relative position is only going to get better with time rather than viewing this as sort of a unique small window where they have an opportunity to do something.

[16:20]

KAGAN: And I can see that. But I also feel like it wouldn't be the first time that we were surprised by somebody making a move. And I would say just from purely military point of view, I am skeptical that, A, we would choose to go to war over a blockade with Taiwan, and B, that we necessarily would succeed in going to war over a blockade of Taiwan. Doesn't mean that means Xi's gonna make his move, but I would say that's not a good position to be in, put it that way.

HASS: I just hope that "Regime Change" by uh Swann and Haberman is not translated into Chinese because ... because that book answers some of the questions that you're raising.

KAGAN: No, absolutely. And and I would, you know, certainly if you were looking at the United States right now as an adversary, you would say, "I've never seen the United States more dysfunctional, more unlikely to get its act together than it is right now."

[17:08]

CZIN: Yeah. I mean, I think one of the interesting things looking forward too, it's not just 2027 and Xi's next Party Congress. I think he's waiting till 2028, right, to see what happens both here in the United States. Is this going to be enduring or ephemeral? What kind of opportunities will that present? But also because Taiwan will have an election too. Right?

And I think that that twinning of events I think will really shape the trajectory going forward. And it seems like he feels comfortable in the meantime. Right? Like maybe not comfortable, like he doesn't like what's going on and all the instability and the inconveniences this, that it's causing, but it doesn't seem to be enough to bestir himself, right, to do something more meaningful in the Persian Gulf or elsewhere.

[17:40]

KAGAN: I mean, look, China is sitting pretty right now. It's a little like falling off a log at the moment for them. And, you know, if we play this out a little further, I think life is gonna get complicated. American decline will cause complications for them.

And the number one complication I think it will cause is Japan is not gonna go quietly into that good Chinese night. And therefore, I think Japan is gonna move to a plan B. And that is gonna be a problem for China. Whether they like it or not, and I think for a lot of the time they've liked it, they know that America has been the constraint on Japan, and that a Japan that is increasingly independent, nationalist, and armed is not the most desirable outcome from the Chinese point of view. So I think that that is, you know, it's not just gonna be all American decline, and that's good news.

CZIN: Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting how they've, how they've responded then to Japan, especially since they've had this rapprochement with Trump. Right? Rather than try to be conciliatory and bring Japan in, they see it as an opportunity to bludgeon them.

KAGAN: Which again, that is dumb, it seems to me, because if I were them, I would not want to awaken the Japanese sleeping giant, because Japan is a giant. It has a tradition of belligerence when you get there. And I think that that could be the w-direction that Japan is heading in.

[18:56]

CZIN: Yeah. I mean, it's striking to me again because it underscores the thesis of your book again. Right? The alternative to an American order is not necessarily some kind of Chinese-dominated order. It's the jungle grows back. Right? It goes feral again.

[19:07]

KAGAN: Or it's, or or to put it less, you know, dramatically, it's it's it's a genuine multipolar world. And I think that, you know, this gets into another area, but I mean, I think that people are not having enough imagination about what that multipolar world looks like because they think that the only powers of that multipolar world will be United States, China, and Russia, and maybe half India, although not really.

But I don't think that's the case. If if the world keeps evolving the way it is, I think we're gonna have at least two more great powers, Japan for sure, and Germany likely. And that in my view is gonna create a whole set of different calculations on the part of everybody. Because in a multipolar world, the idea of permanent alliances, which is what NATO is and which is what the American alliances in Asia are, there's no permanent alliances in the in the in the normal world. In a multipolar world, you have ever-shifting, you know, for this we're allies, for this we're adversaries. And I could see a lot of different shifting.

And that gets to the question which you haven't asked, but also about how tight is the Russia-China relationship. Because I think the China-Russia relationship is built on opposition to the American world order. If the American world order doesn't exist anymore, then that takes away one of the major binding elements between China and Russia, and they might find that in a multipolar world they don't see the world the same way.

[20:33]

CZIN: Yeah. I mean, it, it's it's fascinating because it really suggests greater fluidity. Right? Almost more like the 19th century--

KAGAN: --absolutely—

CZIN: --right? And we were talking about this with Fiona on our, one of, one of our recent episodes, right, about the precisely this dynamic going forward and that Russia-China entente.

What's striking to me as you tick through the various great powers, and one-- this has been on my mind for a while now-- is that they're all very dysfunctional in their own way. Right? China's definitely dysfunctional, as Ryan and I well know. Russia clearly has its own pathologies. Right? India's got deep internal problems. Europe, the United States. You know, I've been jokingly calling this the era of not-so-great power competition. Right?

And I'm just curious to get your thoughts on this because it seems like we're entering this moment where there's not just greater fluidity in terms of power, but none of these powers are really positioned to be kind of paragons for the international system of this is the exemplar, this is what you want to strive to be.

[21:19]

KAGAN: I know, but what a quaint notion that is. Why should there be a paragon of the international system? I mean, that's part of the aberration, historical aberration of the last 80 years, when you could even talk about that. Who was the paragon of, for everybody in the 19th century or in the early 20th century? I mean, that's, the normal world is not like that.

To me, one of the questions is can Americans actually adjust to being one of several? I mean, we've been talking about a multipolar world for a long time. It has not been a multipolar world. It's been an American-dominated world right up until recently. And now now we're gonna be moving into a more genuine multipolar world, which means significant constraints on American capacity to act in the world.

CZIN: So the arc of history is long, but it's a sine curve?

KAGAN: I, yeah, I don't know. I mean, I, I do think, you know, the the the Greeks didn't have an idea of of steady progress. They had an idea of a cyclical world where good times are followed by bad times. And I think that we are too inclined to think that the world we've known for the last 80 years is sort of the world, without understanding that it really has been an aberrant world.

[22:27]

HASS: If we accept that China is going to be a major power, it is not going to shrink within its borders, it is going to be active outside of its borders, where should the United States try to draw the line? Or what what issues require a firm response? Where should America learn to live with growing Chinese activism, if anywhere?

[22:46]

KAGAN: Well, I mean, that depends on what America thinks its interests are. I mean, you know, we did not, the United States did not think it had an interest in what happened in China fundamentally in the early 20th century. I mean, we we signed a lot of agreements saying, "Please leave China alone." But ultimately, when you asked an American official in 1938, "Was China a vital interest to the United States?" The answer was no.

We've been interested in China primarily because we've been interested in having this global role, because that was the decision we made. If if we've decided we're not

playing that global role, then we could tolerate greater Chinese hegemony in its own region. I think we would then have to deal with the possibility of a of a Japanese-Chinese war, which would then inevitably affect us, which is what the founders of the post-war order knew, which is why they did that. But other than that, I don't know.

[23:41]

HASS: You know, Bob, I very much embrace your idea that we're not going to just have a smooth return to the pre-Trump era in 2029. But it does raise the question, what should President Trump's successor do with his or her inheritance in 2029 as it relates to America's role in the world?

[24:00]

KAGAN: I mean, I think that the only path forward is one where we do not build a world order where, where other nations are dependent on the United States. And so what I, what I would like in the in the ideal world, it would be America helping Europe to rearm in a way that is the least dangerous. I mean, it's very important as Germany rearms that it do so within the framework at least of a broader Europe. And I think that's what the Germans want now, , whether whether that would survive a Le Pen victory in France or not to mention an AfD victory in Germany.

And it should be America's goal to say, Okay, the old order is finished. Now we do live in a multipolar world, but we do have things in common. We are still assuming that we are still a democracy in the United States. We will still be democracies, and while we don't anymore want to have a situation where you're basically subservient to us, you do need to stand up. But but that doesn't mean we can't work together to common goals.

And I would say the same thing about Asia.

So I would say instead of being the benevolent hegemon, we could be the benevolent primus inter pares But, uh, even saying this, it sounds so idealistic that I'm almost embarrassed because because because that's generally not the way the world works, you know, where everybody--

HASS: --There was a hint of sunniness--

KAGAN: --a hint of sunniness and the clouds, the clouds just came right back over. Because it-- that's that's a very benevolent situation that I'm describing, and I just think life is more complicated than that. And the rise of Japanese power in Asia and an independent Japan is gonna cause tensions with other Asian countries, not just with China. The rise of German power is gonna cause tensions with other European powers, not just with Russia.

And so, I mean, we blew it. We had a very reasonably stable world order, which everybody decided was the worst thing that had ever happened, and we don't want to do this anymore. But, wait till we see what this next world looks like.

[26:07]

HASS: Well, Bob, as always, this has been an incredibly rich conversation. You've stirred a lot of thoughts for me. Two big questions that I take away from this conversation I'm going to continue to ponder on. The first is, is China going to adopt the great power playbook the previous revisionist great powers have used? What signposts will we use to know whether or not they are embracing the traditional handbook of of rising great powers?

Second, as the world becomes more fluid, as the China-Russia relationship evolves in that space of fluidity, does China have the agility to respond to it, to quickly, adaptively form new partnerships with countries or groupings of countries? Or is this more fluid moment where they're no longer able to sort of be the alternative to a disruptive United States to present themselves as the predictable principled power in contrast to American recklessness? Is that going to be a a difficult transition for them to make?

[27:04]

KAGAN: I guess I would say on the second one, I'm pessimistic that China is all of a sudden gonna become the enlightened, you know, leader of an alternative order.

It was, it was very unusual that the Americans came to that decision. And and it was, it it's close to something else that you said earlier, which is for America, we really have had an option. You know? I mean, American foreign policy has always been sort of optional, and especially a global policy. And so to choose to become a guarantor of the security of other democracies says something about the personality of the United States and, and I'm sure that personality also has bad elements, but it certainly has that. I don't sense any of that in China. I don't sense any sense of global calling. I think China has been fighting, basically it's still in a, "We're the underdog fighting back against a a cruel world that was not designed for us, and so we're looking out for number one." And I think that's that's very clear to everybody, and so it it's not, I don't see China taking on that role.

CZIN: Yeah. I think they have a real Rodney Dangerfield syndrome.

KAGAN: Yeah. Yeah. And they're not, like, they're not, like, uh, super generous in their approach to the world.

HASS: Well, you've given us a ton of food for thought. We look forward to having you back to continuing this conversation.

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