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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **David Sedney**

Episode 41: China's Growing Role in South and
Central Asia

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Haenle: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located here in Beijing, China. I'm Paul Haenle, director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center and I'll be your host.

Today on the podcast, we'll be discussing conflict and cooperation in South and Central Asia and the implications of China's more active role for regional security, development, and U.S.-China cooperation. And there's no better person to discuss these issues with today than my friend and former U.S. government colleague David Sedney, who we're delighted to have with us here in China this week as part of our Carnegie–Tsinghua distinguished speakers program. David was the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia from 2009 to 2013, and deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia from 2007 to 2009 while I served as the NSC China director we worked closely together in that capacity. David was a deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Beijing from 2004 to 2007 and at the U.S. embassy in Kabul in 2003 to 2004. He served previously in Kabul in 2002, also as the DCM after the reopening of the embassy. David, thank you very much for joining us in China this week and for being on our podcast today.

Sedney: Well, Paul, first of all, thank you and your staff and the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for what, for me, has been an exceptionally productive program, but particularly because, as I've been here, I've seen the kind of impact that you and your programming efforts are having on the whole broad range of issues that are more and more important to both China and the United States. So really, congratulations to all of you. And, as we've been traveling around Beijing and talking to various audiences, I have been really struck by the growth and the breadth and perspective of Chinese interlocutors, many of whom I've known for several decades. But this really is a new China with a new perspective, and it's intellectually exhilarating to be here.

Haenle: Well, great, and we're looking forward to hearing some of your insights from your week out here this week. You have served in the government for a long period of time. You are no longer in the government, and you're now in your own private capacity which gives you the ability to have, to a certain degree, wider-ranging discussions, and to move away from the talking points, which is nice sometimes. You're coming from Washington, where ISIS and Russia are the top U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Obama administration at the moment. Before leaving government, as we said you spent many years working on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia. While not at the forefront of security policy in the U.S., you have noted this week a growing focus on this region from the U.S., on the rise of India, U.S.-India relations, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and to a lesser extent Central Asia. Just want to open—if you can give our listeners a sense of your understanding of U.S. policy thinking, U.S. debates currently on the U.S. role in South, Central Asia.

Sedney: Very happy to do so, Paul, and I think it's very appropriate that you mentioned at the beginning that in the United States, Russia, the conflict in the Ukraine, the rise of ISIS, Daesh, the Islamic State are the top two foreign policy issues. And, that really is very much the case, really I would say more for the American people almost, than the administration. I think the administration is reacting to the concern from the public and Congress about what they see as threats to them, to the United States. And here in China, although I think, generally speaking,

people see those places as far away, they are in fact right on China's borders. Russia has a long border with China, Daesh, the Islamic State, is getting recruits from all across Central Asia, Pakistan, India. They are actually threats to China as well. And one of the things as I've gone through this week here, as we've talked to Chinese experts, their growing awareness of global problems, that it's not just all about what happens inside China's border or next to China, but what happens around the world, because China is a great power, it's going to be a major power, and everything in the world really does impact China and vice versa.

In terms of South Asia, it's a really fascinating set of issues there. Most importantly, the rise of India accompanying the rise of China has led some to theorize that there will be a new type of great power rivalry emerging between China and India. China's growing trade with all those areas, occasional military appearances, such as a surprisingly important visit by a submarine to the port of Columbo in Sri Lanka last year. I think what China's finding is everything it does is magnified in the eyes of others, because people see in China a reflection, sometimes, of past powers or current powers, like the United States and United Kingdom.

I'll give you one anecdote, I was recently in Sri Lanka right after the elections there and there were headlines in the papers that said, "India Wins, China Loses," because people saw the candidate who won, Mr. Sirisena, as supporting India and the immediate past president of Sri Lanka, Mr. Rajapaksa, as China's candidate. When I came to China this past week, as I've been going around with colleagues, I found surprise and even horror on the part of local Chinese that they were perceived this way.

Haenle: Yeah.

Sedney: But, that's the consequence of being a big power. There are unintended side effects, things you may think are benign, others can see as threatening. And dealing with those multiple layers of complexity is one of the major challenges for China as it starts to really exercise this role of a new great power which, President Xi Jinping and Chinese leaders have made clear, China will do.

Haenle: Well, you note a growing interest within China in understanding what's happening in China for the reasons that you've laid out. We can see it as well here on the ground. We also note that your visit this week received a warm welcome from a number of different government agencies—military, from the foreign ministry, from the different think tanks—an eagerness to talk to you about these issues, which suggests that they are looking at their own policies and their own involvement in these regions. And, I wanted to ask you what you learned this week on, about China's evolving role in South Asia, especially with regard to Afghanistan, where we see the Chinese beginning to play a larger role, at least diplomatically, on the reconciliation front. But in your view, how is China's policy and approach changing with regard to these regions, and what are the major factors that are contributing to this?

Sedney: Well, I would certainly concur with you, Paul, that the experts we met with both inside and outside the Chinese government are very much interested in learning more. They are being analytical about the approach, they're collecting information before they make a lot of concrete policy judgments. But I guess what surprised me the most was an accompanying sense of urgency, particularly relating to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that has come from, very clearly, because people raise it repeatedly, the concern about Chinese deaths, Chinese citizens being killed here in

China by people who come from that area. They may have originated elsewhere; many of them, of course, are native Chinese from western China, but the trail that leads to attacks, such as the one in Kunming last year here in China, always goes back to areas in Pakistan border areas. The same areas where Al Qaeda has plotted against the United States, against Spain, against the United Kingdom. This is something that is clearly of great urgency to the Chinese leadership. President Xi Jinping has pledged to protect Chinese citizens from these kind of attacks. And so, at the same time the Chinese are being analytical, they clearly have a sense of urgency. They are very much interested in not just talking about problems—which, I have to say, in the past decades when I was here in China we did a lot of talking about problems—they're interested in being actors, they're interested in doing things, and particularly they're interested in protecting Chinese people, and that adds that security dimension that you mentioned. Because, while the focus of China's international involvement has traditionally been, and I think will continue to be, economic development, interest in trying to facilitate peace talks, at the same time the core interests driving what the Chinese are doing in Afghanistan and Pakistan are the safety and security of China itself.

Haenle: So, let me ask on that, because clearly the Chinese continue to put a premium on the economic assistance that they could provide, major announcements of new initiatives in this regard like the New Silk Road and the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank. These are all geared towards exporting Chinese investment out for reasons of economic assistance and development, which the Chinese say will address the root causes of the instability in those regions, and, of course, they've also indicated they're willing to play a larger diplomatic role. The U.S. and the international community have tried to do these things as well, but we have also tried to address the security issue with our own military forces, with a heavy military and security component. In your view, how successful can China be, if they continue to avoid putting forward their own security efforts or their own efforts to try to address the security situation head on.

Sedney: Well, I think you've really hit the nail on the head with your analysis there, Paul. This is the key challenge and complexity for China in moving from a medium-size, regional, middle-power, whatever you want to call what China was in the past, to being a true global major power. Because, you're right, the focus on economic development is key, and the Chinese are correct that addressing the root causes is necessary to solve problems. But, you can't do that, you can't have economic development if you don't have security to start with. Businesses, construction for infrastructure all depend on security, and it's a sad but really true fact that you can't bring security without the use of military force. That goes contrary to China's oft-professed, over many decades, opposition to such use of force. So, China's going to have to, and I think from my time here really clearly, is beginning a reexamination of how it faces that problem.

And, this is not just China, this is many other countries as well. The role of the United States since the end of the Second World War has been in many times, and many places, to be the country, to be the actor, that plays the lead on the military side. And, that's been a very double-edged sword for us. We have the capability to do that, but it's really hard, and it often involves negative consequences. So, even though you have to use military force sometimes in order to address problems, the use of military force to my former boss, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, said, "Whenever you use military force there are always negative consequences."

Haenle: Yeah. Certainly, the Chinese point that out often. I was surprised this week during some of our meetings to hear Chinese experts say that they expected a heavy security component, at

some point, in the New Silk Road initiative. I want to talk about that initiative, the New Silk Road initiative.

You have said this week that there is great interest in the U.S. on what this is all about, but there's a large lack of understanding; there's not a lot of details and many Americans, before you traveled here, in fact, asked you to find out what this is all about, this New Silk Road, One Road and One Belt strategy. What are your takeaways this week, after your discussions with the Chinese on their objectives with this and on the implications that this may have for regional security and regional development?

Sedney: Well, the so-called One Road, One Belt, *yidai yilu* approach, is clearly important because it's already been enshrined in the leading documents, the leading plans every part of the Chinese bureaucracy. However, I came here with the objective and at the request of the colleagues that study China, to try and get a clearer understanding—and, I've learned a lot, but I can't say that I have a, even after hours of discussion—a clear understanding, and I think that's because the Chinese don't yet have a clear understanding. In fact, there are no set talking points, there's no white paper. And, in—

Haenle: White paper expected to be out soon, apparently; they say early April, I think is the latest I've heard.

Sedney: —well, Paul, you and I both worked in bureaucracies, and whenever things are due soon, that means they aren't ready yet. But, that's actually good in a way, because it means the Chinese are thinking about, analyzing, and trying to apply real strategic perspective to this. One of the weaknesses of societies, and I'd definitely say this is a weakness of the United States, is sometimes we act before we think things through, and maybe in China people think things through too much before they act. That's been a criticism of China sometimes, and there needs to be a balance there.

But, I'm very interested in seeing where this goes, because it has great positive potential, not just for China and the region, but also for China-U.S. cooperation, because the areas where China is aiming this One Belt, One Road are also areas that the United States has important security interest and important economic interest, and if we can find a way to work together on this—and I think we can, I think we will—the world is going to be a better place. I'm not at all a believer in this inevitable conflict between China and the U.S. that some scholars talk about or that China's in decline, or that the U.S. is in decline; I think both of us are rising together, problems will arise, but I think our basic trajectories are complementary. We can both do better by working together.

Haenle: So, we should not necessarily see the New Silk Road and One Belt, One Road as a threat to U.S. interests. Instead, you think we need to learn more about it and see, potentially, where there are areas for collaboration, where our interests may come together.

Sedney: Very definitely, Paul. As I've been here, one of the things I've been asked about repeatedly has been the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank—an initiative that China put forward last year—and the U.S. opposition to that, and U.S. lobbying of our allies, including our closest ally the United Kingdom, on this. And, I've been very clear on that, that that's been sadly a mistake on the part of the United States. There is a strain of U.S. thinking that institutions that are not in the leadership role are institutions that we should either ignore or reject. That's not universal

in the U.S., but it is a strain in our thinking, and in this case, I think we, first of all, took on a fight that we were going to lose, and that diminishes the United States, but secondly, we have damaged our relations with China, and if you look at the Chinese press, you will see some gloating even, that our allies are deserting us.

But, it didn't have to be that way, it shouldn't be that way, and we should fix this. We should look for ways to be part of institutions, to advance our interests by being part of them rather than criticizing them from outside. And in fact, over the decades, governments, Republican, Democrat in the United States that I've served with have made that same point about China. We've pushed China to join institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the Nuclear Suppliers Group around the world, telling them that they could play a better role inside than outside.

We need to take our own advice.

Haenle: Yeah, that's a very good point. You're heading back tomorrow, back to Washington, D.C. where you will be part of the unofficial component of Afghan President Ghani's visit to the United States. For my last question, I want to bring it back to Afghanistan and bring it back to China.

President Ghani has stated in public that it is his hope for the U.S. and China that we will make Afghanistan the best example of U.S.-China cooperation. In your discussions this week, what areas have you discussed with the Chinese that you feel might present opportunities for greater cooperation between the United States and China in Afghanistan?

Sedney: Well, firstly, let me say I agree very much with President Ghani, but not because of what is in Afghanistan's interest, but because of what is in the United States' interest. We can never and will never forget that on September 11th, 2001 we were attacked; the greatest attack, the greatest number of casualties on U.S. soil by a foreign attack in our history, and that attack was plotted, planned, and enabled by forces in Afghanistan. We then have carried out a complex, combined civil-military operation that has resulted in an Afghanistan where that's no longer possible. Similarly, as I had mentioned earlier, China has been suffering civilian attacks from the same area. We both have strong, shared security interests in protecting our nations from those kinds of attacks in the future. So, when we have a common, strong national interest in this, we also have a common interest in working together.

So, there are a number of areas. I think a lot of this cooperation right now is very nascent, on a very small scale, very tiny programs, but the potential is huge. One of the problems that the United States and our allies have had in Afghanistan is our efforts, probably by necessity, have been very military-focused. Major infrastructure projects, such as railroads, such as major highways connecting Afghanistan to both its neighbors to the north and to the south just haven't been built. China has the capacity, they have construction firms, this new investment bank I just talked about, [they] should have the capital; so, we can really be complementary and advance our national security interest, and to me it's really clear, we can do that better by working with China than we can by working separately.

Haenle: Well, thank you very much, David, for spending time with us today in this podcast, but also [for] spending time with us throughout the week. I think your visit has been exceptional, I know it's been appreciated by a number of organizations and counterparts here in China, and we certainly appreciate having you out here with us at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center and we welcome you back.

Sedney: Well, thank you very much, Paul; thank you and your colleagues. As I've said, it's been an exceptionally fruitful week for me and I look forward to hearing more of your work and your colleagues' work because I think that's a tremendous initiative, thank you.

Haenle: Well, that's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read or learn more about China's relations with South and Central Asia, you can find more articles, events, [and] podcasts on our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. Thanks for listening and be sure to tune in next time.