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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Wu Bingbing**

Episode 32: China's Role in the Middle East (Part
1)

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Haenle: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center’s 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 in Beijing, China. I’m Paul Haenle, the Director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

Today, we’re at Peking University, visiting Professor Wu Bingbing. Professor Wu is a research fellow at Peking University’s Institute for International and Strategic Studies. He’s the deputy director of Peking University’s Department of Arabic Language and Culture, and director of the University’s Institute of Arab-Islamic Studies. Doctor Wu participated in a panel at the second annual “Carnegie Dialogue” here in Beijing in October on China-Middle East relations. Today, I’d like to give our listeners a sense of the discussion that took place at the Global Dialogue and continue that conversation further. Doctor Wu, thank you very much for participating in our Carnegie–Tsinghua podcast today.

Wu: Thank you.

Haenle: Let me start off by talking about the Middle East. Currently, the Middle East presents a number of crises and challenges to security and stability. These include the rise of ISIS, [the] protracted conflict in Syria, [and] we have the Iran nuclear negotiations taking place with a deadline very soon. What do these developments, and the deteriorating security environment in the region mean for China, and what are China’s primary interests in the region?

Wu: I think China has several interests in the region, including, you know, stability and security in the region, the supply of energy, and also it’s a very important market for China. Besides, you know, there are a lot of Chinese working and living in the region. So I think this deteriorating security situation is a big threat to all these interests. First, you know, to the stability and security in the whole region, and then it can [also] threaten the supply of energy to China, and could make the oil price very high.

Haenle: Yes.

Wu: It’s also a threat to the security of Chinese staff there—the staff of Chinese companies. Also, I think it will hurt Chinese efforts, you know, to help the region [and] to develop its economy, because, you know, more resources will be used to this counter-terrorism effort instead [of being] dedicated to economic development. And also more young people will be more influenced by that [fundamentalist] ideology, so even [if] you can maybe create more jobs, these young people will not like to get these jobs—they will be influenced by that ideology. So I think, you know, all these Chinese core interests in this region have been influenced by the bad security situation in the region.

Haenle: One of the things you hear often by international observers is the dynamic between U.S. dependence on energy from the Middle East going down at a time when Chinese dependence on energy from the Middle East is going up, and many talk about an enhanced role for China given that dynamic. Can you help the international audience understand how that dynamic is viewed here in China?

Wu: First, I think China is trying to diversify its sources of energy supply. For example, we signed a contract with Russia, we certainly bought a lot of oil not only from Middle Eastern countries...

Haenle: Big contract with Russia—the 400 billion [dollars] gas contract.

Wu: ... from Central Asian countries also, right, natural gas from Turkmenistan, and oil from Kazakhstan. Certainly from Middle Eastern and African countries also, but also, you know, from Latin America. But in the future, maybe you know, if the United States wants to exports its shale gas or shale oil, China could be a large buyer also for that. So China is trying to, you know, really guarantee its energy security by diversifying, you know, the sources. One role [remains], I think, for the United States [since] even if China still buys a lot of oil and natural gas from Middle East, the Middle East is [still] the supplier of oil and energy to U.S. allies, including Japan, including South Korea, including European countries. So I think [it is important] for the United States, you know, you have to have a presence in this region, to guarantee [that] your allies could get this supply of energy. Besides, you know, for Chinese we think that in allowing that [the Middle East remains a main energy supplier for U.S. allies], it's also a leverage for you on China. China and India—these countries—still buy a lot of energy from the Middle East, so the United States has to have some influence on the supplier in the Middle East, so that, you know, it can be a kind of leverage for you. You will not give up, you know, your influence in the region. So this independency or dependency on Middle Eastern energy, you know, is not the number one calculation of U.S. policy relations.

Haenle: Let's talk about, if we can, Islamic terrorist extremism. At the Global Dialogue that you participated in—the Carnegie Global Dialogue—experts on your panel talked about the rise of this Islamic terrorist extremism as a consequence of decades of Shia dominance, the disenfranchisement of the Sunnis, and a large number of young, unemployed Muslims with access to modern technology. What impact does the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East have on China's own domestic security? And what policy steps are Chinese leaders taking in response to that?

Wu: I think, you know, the indirect impact, you know, is more important. [The] indirect influence is more importance. For example, first the spread of ideology of extremism [is important], because, you know, [ideologies] cannot have any [physical] limits or borders. So it can spread very fast on the internet. You know, you can see the ISIL is very efficient, and it's a [masterful at] producing this kind of propaganda. So I think, you know, it has some influence in China. I think during the last two years, there [have been] more terrorist attacks in China. You can see that, so I think there's a kind of inspiration. I mean, some people in China were inspired by the situation in the Middle East and also by their ideology. And also, they can learn some methods, you know, on how to produce explosives [or] something like that, you know, on the Internet. So this is, you know, an indirect influence. Maybe [there is] some direct [impact]. We are worried that some global jihadist fighters will come back to China to organize some kind of attacks, but compared to indirect influence, you know, this, till now, is not very serious.

Heanle: Based on that indirect threat, as you've described it, are Chinese leaders taking steps now to deal with that? And if so, what steps are they taking?

Wu: I think you can see some efforts. First, you know, [in terms of information and educating the public], you know, on TV you can see more and more programs that [provide introductions and insights on] Xinjiang, on Chinese Muslims—you know, to show their history, tradition and their lives—to make the people know more on this and to have more exchange and understanding. I think this is very important.

Haenle: This is [directed towards] ethnic Hans' [understanding of] Xinjiang, the region of Xinjiang?

Wu: And also I think you know to show to the people there that you know ...

Haenle: 'there' meaning?

Wu: ... there's interest, you know, among the mainstream media, among the mainstream society that, you know, to know more [about Xinjiang].

Haenle: But this is directed mostly at regions within China?

Wu: Yes.

Haenle: ...not the Middle East.

Wu: Yes.

Haenle: Is there a way that China can deal with rising terrorist extremism in the Middle East, so that it doesn't eventually impact china? Is there any thinking in that regard, with respect to policies and approaches by the Chinese leadership?

Wu: As I know you know, there's no such effort, because, you know, it's not [part of] Chinese tradition or principle that we [would have such policies]. Maybe this is regarded as a kind of intervention, or interference, because we [would] want to change their society, their relation, [and] their tradition, you know, so it's not the way that China wants to [carry out its policies].

Haenle: So even if Chinese experts or Chinese leaders come to the conclusion that if things get worse in the Middle east, in terms of extremism, and over time could have a huge impact on China, there's nothing that could be done now to influence that, because of a long-standing policy of non-interference? Is that what I understand you to say?

Wu: Because you know, we think that these countries [in the Middle East] have their own traditions, their own culture, so this phenomena, even if it's extremism, you know, it has its roots in their society, and their current situation, including the economic situation, the cultural situation, [and] political situation. So you know, it's a comprehensive [issue, with] different dimensions, you know. How could you change their culture and society totally? By just focusing on extremism, maybe you cannot really remove it totally. So I think, you know, for example for China, maybe we want to have a partnership with countries for development—to create more jobs, to have a better

economy, you know, and then, you know, to have a larger scale cultural exchange to know each other more, and to you know reduce, as much as possible, the kind of you know distorting image to each other—something like that. You know, I think you can only have long-run, comprehensive, multi-dimensional solutions, instead of just focusing on one issue. So it's a more like a bilateral relationship instead of, you know, only focusing on security issue, or the threat of terrorism and extremism.

Haenle: Although you described early on key interests that China has in the middle east, as security and stability, [and] energy. Those two interests are significantly affected by extremism. But what I hear you saying is [that] even though those security interests—priorities on the Chinese side—are affected, there is still hesitation for China to involve itself—to bring greater stability—so that the energy markets are not affected, because of the issue of non-interference, and because of the thought that interfering may not solve the problem. Is that the idea? That it may actually cause second- and third-order consequences? Or unintended consequences? Or is it more because the long-standing policy is non-interference?

Wu: I think, you know, for China, we insist in this non-interference policy. So [in terms of] Chinese policies, we really want the security and stability. We want to make contributions, but how? I think, first, we need strong local governments in these countries. If they're capable, you know, they should face their own problems. Right? And secondly, I think we should help to establish a kind of, you know, regional security arrangement or regionalism, or something like that—so reduce the tensions between different countries, reduce the tensions, you know, the conflict in this region, so it will also help to solve the problem. And third level, I think, we [should] seek cooperation between great powers because great powers, if they have more common interests in this region, it will also reduce the tensions in this region. [Consequently,] I think China has dialogues on Middle East with United States. [It also] has dialogues with some European countries. We talked, I think, with Russia also. So I think on these three levels, we can make some contribution to realize more stability. Although for [the] short-run, maybe we cannot achieve this goal, but [in the] long-run, we are trying to achieve that goal. This is one [thing]. Secondly, I said we want to have a comprehensive, multi-dimensional solution. So we will do more on economic development in this region.

Haenle: Let's talk about the third piece, the interaction between the great powers. There's been some acknowledgment in china of a mutual interest between the United States and China to combat ISIS, the spread of ISIS through Syria and Iraq. and its attraction to foreign fighters. How does china see its role in fighting global terror? Would China ever be willing to join a U.S.-led coalition to degrade and destroy ISIS? And if so, how does China envision its role in that effort?

Wu: I think all countries, you know, have their responsibility to fight terrorism and extremism. No one country should, you know, give any space or support to this [issue of] terrorism, extremism. It's an enemy to the people in the world. But for China, I think, first, China highlights the role of the United Nations, because only the United Nations can offer the legitimacy of any military attacks, and other kinds of movements or operations to fight terrorism. This is very important. Secondly, I think multilateralism is very important. It's not a unilateral issue, you know, more countries [are starting] to join this, so I think [an effective] coalition, you know, is a good idea, because it will, you know, make more countries be part of that effort. But for military operations, I

think China cannot participate [in them] based on our tradition [and] based on our principle, because China's worried about this military intervention, especially. And also based on our, you know, lack of experience, and also based on, I think, some kind of distrust between China and especially Western countries I think.

Haenle: So then if putting Chinese boots on the ground in Iraq is not conceivable, what other types of cooperative efforts could the two sides—the United States and China—and other powers make? How could China contribute, and could this potentially be an area of real common strategic interest between the United States and China that helps, over time, to improve the relationship? Is this an area that we should focus on, in the United States and China, in building that cooperation?

Wu: Certainly. This cooperation on security in the Middle East I think is very important. First, you know, in the United Nations, China will support resolutions to fight terrorism, extremism as long as, you know, the resolution is fair. I mean, it should not be misused for other purposes. And also, secondly, I think Chinese companies are still working in Iraq. This is a very important support for the Iraqi economy and it can also give confidence, maybe for the others sides [to think], 'ok Chinese companies still working there, it means that there's some security there, right?' You needn't just to withdraw all your companies away. It will hurt the Iraqi economy. And also, we can offer humanitarian aid, but [only] according to Chinese capability. We will offer a suitable amount [that] we can offer. And [there are] some other things [that China can contribute], I think for example, [by offering] some training to security forces, something like that. China has done a lot in Afghanistan. I think China can do the same in Iraq, but not more.

Haenle: Let me ask you, Doctor Wu, about your comment about the UN resolutions that need to be fair, and they cannot be misused for other purposes. It's important, I think, to give our international and American audience an understanding of what you mean when you say that. There is obviously some sentiment in China that in the past, resolutions have not been fair, and they've been used for other purposes. Are you referring to something specific there?

Wu: I think first, you know for us, I think the case of Libya and the resolution in 2011 in regard of Libya was misused because, you know, in the beginning I think the resolution intended to offer [to] reduce the humanitarian crisis. But it has changed [into] air strikes against the Libyan government, and the Libyan leader.

Haenle: Was this a surprise to China that the resolution would be used in that way?

Wu: I think at least for the people of China, when they watched TV for some half-a-year, air strikes and the Libyan war—[that was a] big surprise. So I think, you know, just look at the current situation in Libya. I think the air strike and Libyan war really didn't play a positive role to create a better situation.

Haenle: So you think the air strikes at the time were not what China had anticipated would be the result of the revolution, and the current situation can be used to justify that conclusion. Is that [your argument]?

Wu: I think you know, many Chinese have expressed our concern of the result of the Libyan war., and we predict that, you know, some kind of chaos would emerge after this, because, you know, if [order] is broken, you know, it's not so easy to be restored.

Haenle: Your second point was a secure environment for companies, that China could contribute to this, to convince multinational companies or other companies not to leave Iraq. But of course, in order for them not to leave Iraq, they need to feel safe and secure. And then you also referred to potential efforts by China to train security forces in Iraq. Can you connect the two? What contributions would be possible on the Chinese side to help companies feel safe and secure in Iraq from a security standpoint? You know, you mentioned that putting Chinese boots on the ground might not be possible, but how could China contribute to the security efforts?

Wu: I think to ensure that Chinese companies can enjoy security in Iraq [there are levels of actions]. [The] first [level] is that we did evacuate some Chinese from the region, I think, between Kurdistan and the southern part [of Iraq].

Haenle: This is Chinese workers?

Wu: Yes, you're right. It means that, you know, you need a secure environment, instead of just a secure, you know, site, because you cannot work in a [merely] secure site, because some terrorists can attack you anytime. So it means that, you know, at least in southern Iraq and in Kurdistan, I think, we can offer a kind of secure environment. Our confidence is based on a reality. Secondly, you know, maybe even in this secure region, you need security forces to protect [civilians and workers]. Security forces and policemen can [also] offer, you know, services.

Haenle: you're talking about Iraqi security forces?

Wu: Yes.

Haenle: Is there a way China can contribute to enhancing the security environment? You talked about [how] China can contribute with humanitarian aid, you talked about [how] China can contribute economically, you talked about [how] China can contribute under a UN mandate in certain ways, but you also talked about the importance of the security and stability so that companies can operate there. Is there a way China can contribute to enhancing security? And if there is, is there a way that the United States and China can work together on that security effort?

Wu: I think that's a little bit more difficult. First, you know, I should say that you know for China, we have a vision of comprehensive security [including various] different dimensions, not only, you know, security of our companies, security forces, military against terrorism. You need to know how to protect security [in a broader sense]. [In order to achieve that] you need more dimensions, right? People need jobs, otherwise, the jobless youth will [will have] more potential to participate in these extremist organizations. So this is number one: [having a] different understanding [of the concept of security]. I think, you know, [by] only focusing on a very narrow definition of security, you cannot guarantee security. And secondly, you know, [we need to ask] why we need the cooperation between great powers? Because [there are things we cannot do single-handedly]. So we still think, you know, the United States is playing a very important role

there. As the United States always mentioned, you still want to play the leading role in this region. So that means you can play more [of a leading role], and we can cooperate with you instead of, you know, [doing] everything hand-in-hand. [There are] some things [that] you can do and some things we can do—we do what we are capable of.

Haenle: That's very helpful in terms of understanding Chinese perspectives. Thank you very much, Professor Wu Bingbing. It's been a pleasure talking to you today, and we hope you will come back to the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center to participate in our activities in the future.

Wu: Thanks, it's my great honor and pleasure. Thank you very much.