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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Christopher Johnson**

Episode 6: China's Security Challenges

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Haenle: You are 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 by the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located here in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center and I’ll be your host.

Today we are joined by Chris Johnson, Senior Advisor and Freeman Chair of China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. Chris spent almost two decades serving the U.S. government's intelligence and foreign affairs communities. He worked as a Senior China Analyst at the CIA where he played a key role in providing analytical support to policy makers during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis, the 1998 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the downing of a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft on Hainan Island in 2001, and the SARS epidemic in 2003. Chris also served as intelligence liaison to two Secretaries of State and their deputies on worldwide security issues. In 2011, he was awarded the U.S. Department of State “Superior Honor Award” for outstanding support to the Secretary and her senior staff.

Chris, thank you very much for participating in our Carnegie–Tsinghua global dialogue and for participating in our podcast. At the dialogue there was a lot of discussion about the Chinese proposal to put forward and to try to construct a new type of major country relations and, just two weeks ago, the new national security advisor, Susan Rice, in her speech, said that the U.S. is interested in operationalizing the new type of major country relations. There is some fear in the United States, however, that this is simply an attempt by China to gain respect and to get the United States to concede to China’s core interests, but that the Chinese side doesn’t necessarily have any interests in building the content for this new framework. I’m interested to know your views on what do you see is behind the Chinese proposal and is there a way that our two countries can use this to actually build a more positive and constructive relationship.

Johnson: Thank you, Paul, and thank you for the opportunity to do this and to participate in that forum, that was really fascinating.

On the issue of the new style of major country relations, I think it’s not just an empty slope. The Chinese clearly thought about it very clearly before they proposed it. I do think that we have entered into the classic cycle of the Chinese seeking to offer a framework for the relationship or a catch phrase, as it was discussed earlier today, before we can get on to substance. I think national security advisor Rice’s formulation was very powerful actually; to acknowledge the language but also to put the emphasis on operationalizing, and I think that has to be the U.S. priority going forward to ensure that there is content to this new concept. In terms of how we might be able to build it, I think we have to understand the broad framework that it’s designed to convey, first and foremost, which is Xi Jinping’s message when he visited the United States as Vice President, which is we have to find a way of avoiding repeating history between a rising power and an established power meeting on the world stage. And let’s face it, the track record is not very good on that front but I think that there is a determination on the part of both leaderships to try to make it work.

Haenle: I agree with you. I think the use of the word operational was very important and I hope that our Chinese friends understand that my own sense is that if we are not able to operationalize this, I don’t think the United States would be interested in that. There is no interest in a new bumper sticker, there is no interest in simply a new definition for the relationship. So, I think you raised some very good points.

Recent actions like the Air Defense Identification Zone have raised questions about China's priority in regards to its regional diplomacy. It's not clear whether China recognizes that these assertive actions with regard to the East China Sea, and also within the South China Sea, can cause diplomatic problems and anxiety in the region. However, the first ever work forum on purposeful diplomacy on October 25th and 24th in Beijing, President Xi Jinping outlined a new strategic approach to China's neighbors. What do you see as the significance of this speech, and what role do you think China sees itself playing in the Asia Pacific?

Johnson: I think the meeting with President Xi's speech was very, very significant. My understanding is that there has only been a very small number of these in the course of the whole P.R.C. regime so that is very significant in and of itself. I think we have seen with President Xi several times since he has been in office, there is a sort of approach that is like this which is to revisit old models but with new content and to sort of telegraph inside the Party machinery especially that he is reaching back into that sort of previous example but then advancing the sort of content with his own philosophy.

I think what was very striking about what he came out with in the speech, from the little bit that we're able to know of course, is this idea that China effectively acknowledges that for the last several years they, to use soccer terminology, have been scoring own goals on themselves with regard to their responses in the region and how they're perceived within the region. And, Xi's message was basically that that's going to end.

In terms of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), it certainly seems to be not in line with this broader message and I think that is something we need to dig into as observers of Chinese foreign policy. Was the East China Sea and was the relationship with Japan actually excluded from that broad sort of concept that he was discussing?

But, I also think you have to understand the zone, not only in the nature of the current dust up in Sino-Japanese relations, but in the broader context of how the regime is looking at its external security environment post the rollout of the U.S. rebalance. My own sense is that due to the leadership transition in 2012, the Bo Xilai affair, and these other things, the leadership really didn't sit down and do a fundamental assessment on what the rebalance means for their assessment of their external security environment. My sense is now that the new leadership has settled in, they are starting to look at these issues and I think something like the ADIZ puts into a very new context Xi Jinping's statements, since he has come to power, about the PLA's need to be able to fight and win wars. For example, these sort of statements, if you look at the defense white paper that came out, they talked about the period of strategic opportunity that China always talks about running through 2020; it still exist but they also say that it is under unprecedented stress, and implied in that is that the U.S. rebalance is the source of that stress.

So, in other words, my sense is that the new leadership team is coming in with an assessment—they don't want conflict, they don't want war, certainly, with their regional neighbors, but they see the potential for conflict between now and 2020 is potentially higher than it has been up until now and they want the PLA and the whole system to be prepared for that fact.

Haenle: You talk about the U.S. strategic rebalancing. It has been called into question in recent months, accused of being unsustainable given U.S. budgetary pressures, instability in the Middle East, and of course President Obama missed the APEC and East Asia Summit recently. How will this affect the United States' ability to carry out the rebalancing strategy and how does this change the view from China with regard to America's policy?

Johnson: I think in terms of the sustainability of the rebalance, this is the fundamental question for the second half of the second Obama administration and how they are going to manage that process going forward.

I think what the administration deserves high marks for in that process is very strong speeches and commentary at a very high level. Deputy Secretary Carter made a very important speech. Of course, Mr. Donilon gave a speech at the Asia Society before he left office. So, there has been much, much discussion that this is real, it's sustainable, and we are going to move forward in that direction. I actually think though now the challenge for the U.S. is in implementing this strategy is, "stop talking about and just do it." Follow the Nike philosophy and just do it, get about implementing it.

And, I think so many areas where we are going to focus our areas on implementing have to be done very quietly, very subtly behind the scenes. I am also very encouraged by the administration's clear decision that they had to rebalance the rebalance, and have a much stronger economic and trade component, and I think we seeing that very clearly and the administration deserves high marks for that.

In terms of the pressures and so on, I think it was best put to me when I was visiting Singapore as the government was shutting down and the President was canceling his trip and so on. It was not that the President was not at these meetings as we heard today from Prime Minister Rudd; everyone has domestic politics. As it was put to me, the message was, "what it telegraphs about our dysfunction at home and what that dysfunction at home telegraphs about the sustainability of our commitment in the region." So, I think that's an issue we have to focus on and address, and I am glad that the President is going to make an out-of-cycle trip in April to address some of these things.

The other piece I think we have to address is, "What's next?" What's next in the rebalance? Everything that's been announced was announced when it was rolled out. The first administration creates the strategic justification and thinking. The second administration is supposed to be about implementation, and I have not seen much in the way of implementation beyond what we saw early on, so I am very keen to see what the next wave of this will be.

Haenle: I want to move outside of the Asia Pacific in terms of looking at China's evolving foreign policy and ask you whether you see changes in China's foreign policy under this new leadership outside of the region, more internationally, or, do you expect to see changes? Will China begin to play a more active role, given that there is a need for China to shape the international environment for its own domestic development? And, where would we expect to see these changes take place and what should we be looking for?

Johnson: That's a great question, Paul, thank you.

I think that we are beginning to see a very different flavor out of the new administration's foreign policy and I think it has several components. The first is that you don't see them talking as much about China being a sort of a developing or backward nation. They still use it, of course, in the official formulations, but there is less focus on it.

I am very struck by the resurgence of the term, "great power diplomacy," *dàguó wàijiāo*. It's in a lot more central publications and these sort of things, and, it's interesting because there was an antecedent to that—Jiang Zemin came up with these formulations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. But, what's striking is that at that time, the way they phrased it, it was clearly taking

into account U.S. hyper-power. In other words, China would engage in great power diplomacy to the degree that they were able under that umbrella of U.S. hyper-power. Now, I think the current version that we are seeing coming out of the current regime says, “No, China is an equal or a near peer with the United States,” and that has totally different connotations. There is a reason why only the United States gets a new style major country relations in terms of the formulation. State Councilor Yang was very clear about that in his article that he wrote earlier this year.

So, I think in terms of the big picture of how they are going to behave, it’s going to be more active, certainly. There’s an approach that stresses: “We will be a great power. We already are one. We need to start to acting like one. We want to do that, however, in concert with the United States, having stable, healthy relations with the United States, and with our regional neighbors. If, however, the United States doesn’t meet us halfway and doesn’t understand that philosophy, we are going to do what we have to do.”

I think we saw some examples of that prior to Sunnylands where Xi appeared to be attempting to get the United States’ attention with a visit to Russia, and some of these other things. In terms of where we should look, I think people have been far too dismissive of their interest in playing some kind of role in the Middle East. When Xi hosted the Palestinian President and also the Israeli Prime Minister, there was a lot of laughing, “China couldn’t possibly play a role.” I happened to be in the Middle East when that happened; they were very dismissive. But, I think they missed the message, which was that, “As a global power, we need to be playing in this region.” Of course, there is the energy and everything else that they have to care about. But there is a political aspect here, and they are starting to play a role in that region, and I think that is one indicator of where they are going.

Haenle: Of course, the United States—the administration has been saying for some time that it hopes China can begin to play a more constructive role, a more active role on the global stage. However, if and when China does, it’s not clear that it will always be on an American agenda, and that they will have the same interests or prefer to use the same approach.

Where do you see the biggest challenges internationally with a more active Chinese foreign policy, and where might we see the greatest opportunities for cooperation?

Johnson: I think, in terms of challenges, we are going to continue to see the challenges where we have seen them already, which are in a lot of developing countries where there is a case for resources. China obviously has been trying to work on its reputational issues in these countries, they understand that it’s a net negative. It’s very difficult for the Chinese Communist Party to be perceived as a neo-colonist power in Africa on these sorts of issues. So, I think we need to watch to see how they manage that dynamic in terms of the challenges and I think they are going to continue to face those. It is definitely true that every time they show up in a new area—there were just some articles recently about their presence in Eastern Europe, for example, and about how that is changing the dynamic there—it only seems to have a negative connotation. So, how China is able to shed this perception that they are a neo-mercantilist power is going to be a real challenge for them.

In terms of opportunities, I think it’s about how we manage the development of the content of the new type of major country relations. And that’s going to be these global issues, humanitarian disaster relief, climate change issues, all these sort of global challenges, even cyber security, and some of these areas that are more sensitive in our bilateral relationship; there is a global pathway, if you will, to be able to work constructively with the Chinese. And, I think we

shouldn't shy away from looking for opportunities in the region to work together. My own feeling is that it would be quite significant if we found a way to work together in Myanmar, for example. This is an area where it's perceived to be a zero sum conflict between China and the United States. What a powerful message it would be to the region, in terms of our relationship, and the constructive nature of it, if we could find a way to work together there.

Haenle: Well, great, thank you very much for spending a few minutes with us today on the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, and thank you as well for participating in the Carnegie–Tsinghua Global Dialogue.

That's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you would like to listen to previous episodes of the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, including a discussion with former National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, on the new type of great power relations, you can find those along with a summary of each interview on the Carnegie–Tsinghua website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. I encourage you to explore our site and to see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.