



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Jon Finer**

Episode 86: Evaluating Trump's First 100 Days

May 12, 2017

Haenle: My colleagues and I at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center had the honor of hosting Jonathan Finer, a Harvard Spring fellow and John Kerry’s former chief of staff and director of Policy Planning, this past week, as part of our Carnegie Global Dialogue’s Middle East discussions. Jon and I discovered, during his trip to China this week, that he and I actually occupied the same chair in the National Security suite in the West Wing at different periods of time when each of us worked in the White House: sitting between the National Security Adviser, and the Deputy National Security Adviser. A Rhodes scholar, Jon previously worked at the White House as an adviser to Former Deputy National Security Adviser Tony Blinken, as well as Vice President Joe Biden. Before that, Jon was a journalist who covered the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Israel’s conflicts with Lebanon in 2006, and Gaza in 2009, as well as Russia’s war with Georgia in 2008. We were delighted to have Jon out so soon after leaving office this past January to share his own views as well as hear from a variety of Chinese [scholars] on pressing issues across the U.S.-China relationship.

In this podcast, Jon and I discuss the major milestones of the Trump administration in its first 100 days and what it indicates for the future direction of American foreign policy. Jon shared his insights on how past presidents’ policy at the end of their term have often been quite different from what they did in their first 100 days. Ahead of the Belt and Road summit here in China next week, Jon and I also discussed his views on China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the prospects for future engagement between the United States and China. Thank you very much for listening to [our] “China in the World” podcast, I hope you enjoy my conversation with Jonathan Finer.

Jon, it’s been great to have you out here in Beijing with the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center this week, and thank you for joining the China in the World podcast. You just spent 7 and a half years in the Obama administration and now [you are] at Harvard with the Institute of Politics, so we’re honored for having you here this week. Thanks for joining us.

Finer: It’s great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Haenle: You know, President Trump recently hit his 100-day mark, and there’s been some criticism that he’s not been able to achieve many of the things that he himself set out to do during the campaign and in the transition. You focused in the administration quite often on the Middle East, in your work with Secretary Kerry [and] Vice President Biden, and I wanted to get a sense from you [of] what you think, if anything, we might be able to learn about the Trump administration’s approach to the Middle East after the first 100 days. Can we begin to sketch out some outlines of what we might expect?

Finer: Sure, thanks Paul, I appreciate the question. I am going to start off by doing something unusual for me, which is agreeing with President Trump about something, which is that this 100-day marker is a [little] bit arbitrary. It’s more of a media deadline than a marker that exists in the real world. I actually, in coming out here, looked back at some of the accomplishments and developments of the first 100 days of the Obama administration in the Middle East, and what you realize quite quickly is that if you draw too many conclusions based on that period about what the Obama administration’s policy would be for the rest of its term, it would’ve been off by a fair bit. It looked, during the first 100 days of the Obama administration, like you would have a war with Iran, as opposed to a nuclear deal with Iran, or that the United States might withdraw all of its troops from Iraq and leave the region in the rearview mirror, as opposed to where we ended up at the end of the Obama administration, which is having returned a bunch of troops to Iraq to fight a

different kind of a war against ISIS. So with that caveat, I will say, though, [that] you can start to see some kind of indications of what the Trump administration's approach to the region is going to be. There are at least a few signals that you got from the campaign, and from some of the early comments that the president has made [which are] that he's going to want to be tougher on terrorism than he believes that his predecessor, President Obama, was; that he's going to be tougher also on Iran, than the Obama administration was; he believes that the Obama administration was a little bit too conciliatory to Iran in making the nuclear deal; and that he's going to want to avoid—drawing a lesson maybe less from Obama but from the Bush administration—wars that entangle the United States in the region. He called those during the campaign “quagmires,” which I think is a view that a lot of the American people would share.

Haenle: But, you know, one of the things that we see out here in China as we look at the administration's China policy, is that things that Donald Trump talked about in the campaign, that left us with the impression that there would be many departures from the previous policies of Obama or Bush, in fact [have not been carried out]. We're seeing somewhat more of a consistent approach [with the previous administrations' policies]. How is that dynamic playing out with respect to policy towards the Middle East?

Finer: Yes, I think you're right. I mean, I think some of us who watch the region closely have been surprised to see areas of continuity where we expected change, and areas of change where we expected continuity. So, on the first side of the scale, I think we expected to see a big difference in the way the new administration fought terrorism, because President Trump was so critical of the Obama administration's approach on the campaign trail. What we've seen in reality has very much been an extension of the Obama administration's focus on ISIL and [the] decision to fight on any number of fronts, including the military, but also countering foreign fighters and foreign financing and the ideology of the group.

On Iran, you know, where we might have expected the new administration to be tougher on the nuclear deal, what we've seen so far—and it's still very early—is the new administration has certified through Congress that Iran is in fact complying with its obligations under the nuclear deal, although we've also, I think, seen some indications [that] going forward they are going to be scrutinizing very carefully [not only] Iran's compliance, but also Iran's broader activities in the region. But so far, that's another area of kind of unexpected continuity. A third area of continuity we might not have been expecting was on Israel and Palestine. You know, we've heard some comments by the president during the campaign that he was going to lean very far in the direction of Israel in terms of that conflict, and what we've seen so far [are] some pretty tough comments, actually, from the administration on Israeli settlement activities and the warm embrace, just recently, of President Mahmoud Abbas who's just been in Washington and in the White House. And then when we might have expected continuity from the new administration, this non-intervention that I mentioned earlier, this desire to avoid quagmires and military activity in the region, we've actually seen, I think, some signs that [the Trump administration is] following a more militaristic approach in the Middle East than we might have expected in places like Yemen, in terms of increased troop numbers in Iraq and Syria, and then some indications [of] other conflicts, like Libya, and potentially even more confrontation in Iran. You might see an increase in military activity on those issues as well. And that's not something I think we expected during the campaign.

Haenle: How much of this has to do with the kind of people, the composition of the team that [Trump] is building? What can you learn about the advisers that he's bringing in and the people that he's putting into key positions, whether it's national security adviser, cabinet secretaries, [and so on].

Finer: Sure. I think one significant development that is a break from the recent past has been an emphasis on military personnel and military advice, to some extent at the expense of diplomatic intelligence, sort of soft power approaches to making foreign policy. What you've seen is a President who has decided to surround himself with a large number of former or active duty officers on the National Security Council, fewer diplomats, fewer intelligence professionals. He has populated the top ranks of the new administration with, for example, a secretary of defense who is a retired four-star, a general, a national security adviser who is in active duty three-star general. At the same time, in terms of the other tools available to foreign policy makers, diplomacy and development, you've seen a desire to slash dramatically the budget of the state department, you've seen an unwillingness, at least so far, to fill many of the most senior jobs in a diplomatic core, and frankly just a de-emphasis of diplomacy as a sort of desirable tool—first resort—in making foreign policy, which is a big break from the Obama administration, which came in very early on signaling that diplomacy was going to be where they put their weight.

Haenle: Secretary Tillerson, the secretary of state, gave a speech this week and something that he also said, which I'd be very interested in your perspective on, is [that] he talked about what the "America First" policy means for the foreign policy of the Trump administration, and one of the points that he made was that the foreign policy of the Trump administration would be driven by U.S.-interests, and not so much primarily by U.S. values. How do you react to that, and how do you think that'll affect Trump's approach to the Middle East region?

Finer: The way the Obama administration thought of this divide between interests and values is that actually, it was a bit of a false choice, that pursuing our interests meant pursuing our values, and vice versa. These were sort of mutually-reinforcing—acknowledging that sometimes there are tensions, but that overall, you know, you could accomplish both of these objectives. What Secretary Tillerson seemed to signal, in his speech this week to the State Department's workforce, was that the Trump administration sees interests and values as often colliding, often in tension, and when these collisions occur, the administration is going to side squarely with the pursuit of interests and against necessarily the pursuit of values. I think we're already seeing that play out a bit in some of the early steps by the administration in terms of the warm embrace that President al-Sissi [received] in his visit to Washington, something that President Obama had not done during his tenure. The other key early example, I think, is the phone call President Trump placed to President Erdogan in the aftermath of the Turkish referendum through which President Erdogan seized a lot of power inside Turkey's democratic system and brought that power into the office of the presidency. That troubled, I think, a lot of American observers of Turkish politics, but the President chose instead to call President Erdogan to congratulate him for what was a very narrow victory in that referendum. By the way, I think some of this is going to be very well received...

Haenle: Yes, I was going to say in China, I think this would be very well received—the idea that interests will drive the relationship with China, not values. How does that play out in the Middle East?

Finer: I think very similarly. I think there are countries in the region, including key U.S. partners, like the Gulf states, like Egypt which I just mentioned, and like even Israel to some extent, where there have been areas of frictions with the United States when the United States took issue with some things that these countries were doing internally, within their borders, issues on which these countries believed that the United States was interfering in their affairs—similar to some of the frictions that sometimes exist in the U.S.-China relationship. There may be an opportunity created for the new administration by essentially taking some of those issues off the table. That said, whether that actually benefits the United States to take areas of our own values and stop the pursuit as opposed to simply benefiting these countries to no longer have to answer to us on some of these questions really remains to be seen.

Haenle: Another element that we see within the Trump foreign policy approach is this idea of ambiguity—we talk about [it] a lot with respect to his approach to Asia, and I'm sure you know you can also examine it in the context of the Middle East—this idea that he doesn't want to be predictable, wants to use unpredictability. How do you think about the issue of ambiguity, as he tries to use this as a tool for him to deal with countries or regions where the United States has interests? How does this play out in the context of the Middle East?

Finer: President Trump spoke quite harshly during the campaign about what he thought was a naively predictable approach by the Obama administration. He would caricature the idea that the Obama administration would say, you know, “we intend to launch a military operation against Mosul in Iraq in 4 months.” And then in three months, make the same statement and say, you know, “this is coming, everybody be on the lookout,” and [Trump's] view was that this telegraphed American steps to our adversaries and our enemies and that this undermined our objectives. You know, he clearly believes that a degree of ambiguity in making foreign policy makes sense, and I think on a tactical level, there can be some benefits to ambiguity like this. One of the things that you hear from talking to foreign officials about how they're approach the Trump administration is that they find the Trump administration very hard to read. You know, they listen very carefully to public statements that are made by the secretary of state, by the secretary of defense, by the president, by the UN ambassador, and they see sometimes contradictions in these statements, they don't know how to interpret U.S. policy.

Now, if there is in fact a strategy behind that ambiguity, perhaps that could create a degree of effectiveness for the new administration. But I think the concern that a number of use have is that this ambiguity is not in fact strategic, not in fact designed to accomplish particular objectives, but actually just a reflection of their inability to get everybody on the same page and the same talking points, which really is less strategic ambiguity and more simple confusion. It's hard to see how that advances American goals.

Haenle: I mean, one of the reasons I would imagine for this [situation] is in my sense, you don't see the national security policy process working quite yet. It still seems to me to be the White House being run kind of like a family business where you have a good, highly-qualified national security adviser in place, but we don't seem to have the key people throughout the administration. This is something that you've written about recently. How do you think that's affecting the degree to which the Trump administration can employ an effective foreign policy?

Finer: Process is a pretty boring concept to a lot of people who've not worked in national security and in foreign policy, but it's important for the following reasons: one is that, you don't see this as often on the domestic side of policy making, but in national security, with the stakes so high, what people tend to think as important is having all the people around the table who have a degree of expertise so that mistakes are not made in the development of policies because someone who might've known wasn't there to raise an objection. That's one reason why you want an inclusive policy process. The other reason is, you know frankly a bit more practical, is that it's not the White House that actually implements foreign policy, it's the departments and the agencies. They're not included in the policy discussions, it is very hard for them to know what exactly is intended and how they're supposed to do their jobs of implementing the administration's approach. The best example of this so far has been on the travel ban, which the White House seemed to decide on more or less in a very small group, not even of people on the National Security Council, but political advisers very close to the president. It was issued late on Friday night, most people who were supposed to implement it from the state department and the Department of Homeland Security read about it in the press...

Haenle: Hadn't been brought into the process...

Finer: ...Hadh't been brought into the process and the result was just mass confusion of all these people being stuck in airports, protesters, demonstrators, and just a total lack of clarity on what this process was intended to accomplish. Some other examples are like that, but there is a cost.

Haenle: You know, Jon, I make a similar point often and I think this point about process, I agree with you very much, is very important. It may have to do with the fact that you and I occupied the same seat in the first floor of the West Wing as the adviser, or in my case we call it the executive assistant to the deputy national security advisor, when I worked for Steve Hadley and you worked for Tony Blinken. It was that job, actually, that made sure the process worked, at least that's part of the job that I had—was that similar when you were there as well?

Finer: 100 percent. And particularly the deputy national security advisor's job, in some ways, I think is the hardest job in foreign policy making, because the deputy is responsible for such a broad range of foreign policy issues that maybe never quite rise to the level of cabinet officials, or principals...

Haenle: Or the president...

Finer: ... well, certainly the president. The deputy has to be familiar with all of them.

Haenle: You see the importance of the process from that job, and one of the things Steve Hadley said all the time was, you've got to have the buy-in of the agencies, because, going back to your point, they're the ones who are going to implement it. So I agree with you very much.

I want to sort of end by talking about [the Belt and Road Initiative]. You know, you've been out here for the last few days, you have talked to Chinese experts and seniors influencers, and media about U.S. approach to the Middle East, and you've heard from Chinese interlocutors about China's approach to the Middle East, and one of the things that I think may be relatively new in terms of China's policy toward the Middle East is the Belt and Road Initiative. We heard

scholars talking about the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative with respect to China's engagement in the Middle East, and I wanted to just get your general reactions to the Belt and Road Initiative and just get a general sense from you [on] how you think it'll impact China's approach to the Middle East.

Finer: I guess I'll start off by saying I think all of us are still learning exactly what this initiative, which used to be called strategy, apparently now it's been renamed an initiative, is going to consist of. It sounds, at least for now, like it's going to be largely big infrastructure projects in the development space, but the specifics, I think, are still being worked out, or at least have not yet been revealed publicly. But based on what we know so far, it sounds like the Chinese are going to attempt to enhance their role in the region, and enhance their relationships, at least with the 22 countries they maintain diplomatic relations in the region, through a series of bilateral projects with each of these countries; and that they desire, for now, to not make a major foray into the politics of the region, which they consider, I think, messy, but to stay above the political frame and to pursue this economic agenda. I think there's real risk, frankly, to the Chinese in attempting that, and I think there may be so far an underestimation as to how hard it is going to be to stay out of politics when every step in one country will be viewed potentially by a rival country as a step against its interests. So it's going to be hard, I think, for them to avoid the political phrase.

Similarly, on the U.S. side in interpreting this new initiative, I think there's a very real risk of being too dismissive of it, or too antagonistic towards it, the way arguably the United States was toward the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). I think there actually is an opportunity here for the United States if people are open to it and engage with the Chinese on it to try to collaborate and at least, in the early stages, to try to shape this in a direction that is positive from the point of view of the region and from the point of view of U.S. interests, especially at a time when the new administration has signaled its own desire, frankly, to get out of the development business in the region. If the Chinese are going to be occupying that space, it would be good for the United States to work with them on what their intentions are.

Haenle: Or at least know what the Chinese are doing. You know, when we've had discussions with the Chinese about, you know, the idea that the U.S. dependence on oil and energy from the Middle East is actually declining, [we realized that] China's is increasing considerably, that perhaps China needs to take a step forward and do more to help maintain stability, whether that's on the security question, or the political question. What we've heard from the Chinese in response is, "look, the United States has much more capacity and capability in the security side, so why don't you focus on security, and we'll deal with the economic side." I can't imagine that that would be a bargain that the Americans would be interested in and to a certain extent, it seems to me, and you mentioned it in your reaction, that we dismissed the Belt and Road Initiative, and simply deal with the security issues through our military approach, which you've described. You know, we could end up, over time, getting to that arrangement, without even having agreed to it.

Finer: Right—a *de facto* division of labor between the United States and China where the United States handles the security and military side of maintaining stability in the region, and China reaps the economic benefits. It's clearly not in the interests of the United States, and I think doing that would be forgetting what I think is a big lesson of recent U.S.-China relations, which is the most fruitful areas for U.S.-China cooperation really have been these big, global challenges, outside necessarily of this sort of "near abroad" for China or the bilateral relationship between the United

States and China. But on issues like climate, where the United States and China have made history-making, enormous progress on the Iran nuclear deal, where the United States and China and other countries kind of got together to tackle this enormous global threat of non-proliferation. Here's another example: the development of the Middle East is going to be a huge security issue, frankly, for the world in the aftermath of some of the disruptions caused by the Arab Spring. There will literally need to be hundreds of billions, if not trillions of dollars, invested in the region to get it back to the condition it was even in before 2011, let alone on a stable development path for the future, and the United States and China are the two countries that really are equally positioned to try to advance that work if they can get on the same page, even to some extent ...

Haenle: It seems to me that the U.S. administration would be smart to find the balance between, as you said, the risk of dismissing it to a certain extent, which is what happened with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the United States found itself or looked as though it was 1. Insecure; 2. Weak, because it couldn't convince countries not to join, and then in the end it was isolated. I think there are lessons, as you suggested, we can learn from that on one end of the scale. But fully embracing it, as you say, it's not fully clear how this is going to play out, whether it will work—there's a lot of risks in it. So fully embracing it is not an approach either. But there's got to be some middle ground where the United States can think of a smarter strategy to engage it, help shape it, better understand what it is, and avoid some of the potential risks to U.S.-China relations.

Finer: Yes, I think that's right. Given the extraordinary challenges in this region, it is hard to imagine that this initiative is going to be the panacea that solves all the problems. That said, you know, it can either be a force for some good, or something else entirely, and I think U.S. engagement with it gives it a better chance of being at least somewhat successful than it might otherwise be.

Haenle: Well Jon, thank you very much again for coming out to China, we hope you'll come back soon and visit us often. Thank you for doing the China in the World podcast.

Finer: Thank you for having me, I really enjoyed it.

Haenle: Thank you. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, I encourage you to explore our website and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening and be sure to tune in next time.