



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Wu Bingbing**

Episode 33: Iran Nuclear Talks and the Middle
East Peace Process

November 24, 2014

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 in Beijing. 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 Arabic Islamic Studies. Doctor Wu participated in a panel at the second annual Carnegie Global 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 here further. Doctor Wu, thank you very much for participating in our Carnegie–Tsinghua podcast.

Wu: Thank you, yeah.

Haenle: There's some media coverage recently of a growing military-to-military relationship with Iran. For the first time ever last month, Chinese [unintelligible] visited Bandar-Abbas—the Iranian port—at Bandar-Abbas, and recently the head of Iran's navy visited China and the two sides expressed the desire to enhance military ties. This, of course, takes place against the backdrop of the Iranian nuclear negotiations and the deadline that's fast approaching. What should the United States and the international community understand about this growing military-to-military ties? How does this fit into the overall international approach on Iran?

Wu: I think we should understand this in a broader background. China is trying to develop a closer relationship with the Middle East. I think two decades ago our relationship with the Middle East was limited. But because we had more and more interests, our relationship has strengthened more and more. So for [the] military [aspect], this kind of cooperation, certainly our fleet also has visited some GCC campuses before. Also we have [had] some kind of a joint military maneuver with Turkey, right? We sent some airplanes to Turkey through Iran before. So, you see, our military cooperation with Iran is normal, based on this background, because we cannot ignore some countries. We should develop a balanced relationship with different countries. So if we can have this cooperation with GCC countries and Turkey—even [though] Turkey is a NATO member—so why can we not have the same thing with Iran? So we want to, you know, make a balanced military cooperation.

Haenle: These efforts—these recent efforts—on the military-to-military side, [do they] have any impact on the Iranian nuclear negotiations? Does it put Iran in a strengthened position or does it not have an impact?

Wu: I don't think so. Because the negotiation now focuses more on details; how many centrifuges, how to deal with the stockpile of this nuclear material, something like that, and for the U.S., what's your consideration of leaving or lifting some sanctions? So [the] Chinese position—any movement or an activity—cannot influence...

Haenle: They're not connected.

Wu: Yeah, because this consideration is [a] long-run consideration, it is not a short-run consideration... The numbers [of centrifuges] cannot be changed easily. Otherwise the negotiation should be much easier. I think for [the] Chinese, we really want to see a final deal reached. It will reduce the tension in the whole region. It's also helpful for different parties, including regional countries and also China and the United States, because I think the sanctions imposed on Iran always hurt China because we buy energy from Iran, we have economic cooperation with Iran.

Haenle: Let's move to one other Middle East issue, and that is the Middle East peace process. In May of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, the Chinese leadership offered to broker a meeting between the two in an apparent gesture for China to play an enhanced role as a mediator. At the same time, President Xi Jinping announced a Four Point proposal for solving the Palestinian issue, and that attracted a lot of international attention. Last summer—this past summer, during the conflict in Gaza, China put forth a Five Point Peace proposal in Egypt. Do these efforts indicate a fundamental shift in China's diplomatic role in the Middle East peace process?

Wu: There's a shift, but I don't think it's fundamental. It's a gradual process. I think because China has more and more interest, China must be more and more involved in the regional issues. So [the] Palestinian issue is always very important issue and a core issue from the understanding of Chinese in this region. So China must offer some kind of contribution to find [a] solution or to try to find [a] solution. So I think China's position is always the same—to have an independent sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as the capitol, and the border should be on the 1967 border. All the same. But I think the change is China now is trying to have a more vocal voice on a higher level. Because our President talked on this—it has different influence than the foreign minister talks on this, or when the State Counselor talks on this. Also I think this kind of change is a signal of our shift to a more proactive position in the Middle East, but it's a long process. China should and is very cautious in this regard.

Haenle: So from that standpoint of being cautious, do I understand you to say that you don't expect, for example, Chinese leaders to begin playing a much more engaged and intense role in the diplomatic efforts? As you know, these diplomatic efforts can often be very politically risky for leaders around the world to involve themselves in them. How far is China willing to go in this process? Do you expect to see this kind of intense engagement by the Chinese or do you think that Chinese leaders will be putting forward proposals for consideration?

Wu: I think first we have some kind of advantage because we are considered by the region as [relatively] more neutral. [It's] different from some other countries, [as] we don't have an alliance with any country in this region so we can talk with any party in the negotiation. Our special envoy to the Middle East has visited the Middle East several times, and he can talk with both Palestinians and Israelis. Sometimes he can even talk with Hamas. So China can do something maybe the other parties cannot do in the region, I's true. But still, I think based on the experience of the other countries, especially the United States...your Secretary of State has made visits to the Middle East to find solutions for this Palestinian issue more than ten times. So how could China expect to have some efforts, to vocal voices and some diplomatic activity to have a solution for this long-term conflict? It's a little bit naive. So I think China will be cautious to see what we can do, and we

will. But the direction is very clear—we want to reduce the tension and we want to find a solution. We want to help a peaceful solution.

Haenle: Well 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 and participate in our activities in the future.

Wu: It is my great honor and pleasure. Thank you very much.