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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 84: What Happened at Mar-a-Lago?

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Haenle: U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded last week their first summit on the grounds of Mar-a-Lago in Florida. This was basically a get-to-know-you meeting for both leaders. One of the most significant outcomes was the new 100 day plan announced by Secretary of Commerce Ross, which will set out guide posts to rebalance the bilateral trade relationship along with an expedited timeline. Presidents also establish a new U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue at the summit, which will replace the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and puts the dialogue into four new pillars. Xi Jinping visit was eclipsed by the U.S. strike of Syria. U.S. allies and partners around the world welcomed the attack, but China was less thrilled. I sat down this week to discuss the summit and its outcome with professor Zha Daojiong from Beijing University. Professor Zha Daojiong is a professor of international political economy, where he does research on both traditional and nontraditional security issues. He also is a senior Arthur Ross fellow at the Center on U.S.-China Relations at the Asia Society, and he has followed and written extensively on U.S.-China relations. I think you will find his perspectives quite interesting. He talks about his view that the outcome of the summit was above his expectation. He shared with me his perspectives on why many Chinese were upset that President Trump launched 59 tomahawk missiles at Syria during the dinner on the first night of the summit in Mar-a-Lago, and he also discussed his views on President Xi's four main goals for the summit, including one that relates directly to President Xi's anticorruption campaign. I met professor Zha at his offices on the campus of Beijing University this week to discuss this summit. Please enjoy this conversation and leave us a rating on iTunes if you enjoy our podcast.

Zha: I am happy to do this with you. Carnegie-Tsinghua has been a very active venue for us to exchange ideas. I thank you for having the opportunity, give me the opportunity to do this. I got interested in international political economy issues in the mid-1980s.

Haenle: I realized you are, you're born in 1965 so you're a year older than I am. I'm born in the year of the horse and you must be born...

Zha: I was in Anhui Province and we had a professor of journalism on a short-term visit. He was with us for a year, half a year—professor Johnson. A very straight-talking person. And he was teaching me. I was an undergraduate student at writing and you know [as a] journalist, he was showing us how these media stories developed and one of the details that really stuck in my head was he said—this was 1984-85—he said the United States had more trade with Taiwan than with mainland China and I was thinking 'ok, I have no base to challenge that statistically.'

Haenle: Yeah. Five years after normalization of relations with China.

Zha: But I wanted to know how that came to be the case and what Taiwan was selling to the United States, and what China was selling to the United States and vice versa. It was one of those events that just got stuck in my head and I wanted to know [how] the outside world gets an idea of how things are actually rolling and moving on the grounds across national boundaries. Rather than just the big ideas.

Haenle: So trade, economics...

Zha: Trade, economics, and business. So that the kind of but I was trained a language student.

Haenle: In which language?

Zha: English. I don't have a very strong let's say disciplinary background of macro mathematics or physics.

Haenle: I've noticed you've spent, if you're looking at your background, you've spent a lot of time overseas, including 14 years in the United States and Japan altogether. How did that happen and what did you learn from being aboard? How has that changed the way you approach your work?

Zha: Well, when I was in the US, this was 1989 to 95, and I was primarily on the west coast. First in the state of Washington, later on I was in Hawaii, the East West Center.

Haenle: So you did your masters in Washington and you PhD at the University of Hawaii: East – East Center. You picked a nice location to do your PhD.

Zha: It's not just a nice location. I think [that] looking back Hawaii did me a lot of good because being out there in the middle of the Pacific, we were less under the influence under the so-called being politically correct of the first Clinton administration. Chinese students in Hawaii, in particular, were less exposed to these kinds of overseas quote human rights movements that attracted attention and time from other Chinese students. So we were students, including myself, actually going through the more tradition style of teaching: history, policy process, and with the East-West center, those days still were active in trying to reach policy debates within the United States and with Asia. I benefited greatly from being a research assistant to the research programs at the East-West Center. So those were the good years. We had far less of a theory or ideology driven approach to understanding international issues. When I was in Japan, this was mid-1990s, this was when Japan was going through the impact of the Asian financial crisis. And of course, I was there teaching in English, but never-the-less I was never trained as a Japan specialist. I had to learn Japanese from the beginning just for everyday getting by. But they, it was very useful in relating with my colleagues, and Japanese colleagues, who were more comfortable speaking in a foreign language with a foreigner like me. And I was related with a lot of Europeans and Americans, who were in Japan talking about a great number of issues.

Haenle: And they probably could speak Japanese. Probably.

Zha: Many of them spoke good Japanese.

Haenle: But they were not Chinese, so you used English to talk to them.

Zha: More so English. And they helped to broaden the horizon about how Japan is understood and really you see a great effort on the part of many Japanese and individuals who understand Japan. Actually today you see, you can see a sort of repetition of that here in China. We have our institutions and individuals that try to get China understood by the rest of the world.

Haenle: And when did you come to Beijing University?

Zha: Beida?

Haenle: Yeah, here

Zha: 2007. That after four years at the neighboring school, People's University, Renmin Daxue.

Haenle: And how much of your attention do you focus on U.S.-China? You and I have been in a lot of U.S.-China discussions. My sense is that you spend quite a bit of time looking at this. In fact, we were in a number of discussions before this recent summit at Mar-a-Lago. So how much of your focus is on the U.S.-China bilateral relationship?

Zha: It is about, I wouldn't say have half, but a least a quarter of my time. This is, we are now in the eighth year of the regularized what is called track II dialogue, with a group of Americans that the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations puts together. Prominent figures in the group include Carla Hills, who was the U.S. trade representative under Reagan, and Robert Rubin, who served at treasury under President Clinton. So I learned a lot from these individuals who are really walking dictionaries of U.S.-China relations, especially in the economics field. The other side we related to, I'm the only political scientist by training on the team. I learned from follow professors from Beida, who are well trained economists. In addition to professors, we have bankers, we have retired government officials. So that's a very important venue of trying to...we have developed a rapport through these biannual meetings where we really talk to each other as individuals rather than representatives of a particular interest.

Haenle: Well I'm a big fan of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. In 2002, I had the honor to be in the on the inaugural group of U.S.-China Young Leaders.

Zha: Oh Ok! They still do that!

Haenle: They still do that every year. They just had the most recent group here in Guangzhou. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend this year. And the National Committee, we do as much we can with the National Committee at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center because we...

Zha: The committee is doing more of these very useful exercises—I'm in the business of promoting the committee. But this just came to my head—they are now organizing more and more of these short two week, sometimes two week, sometimes shorter, trips by congressional staffers and congressmen to Beijing.

Haenle: We usually do something with them.

Zha: This is very useful in reaching out to incumbents in the American political process and impact the White House.

Haenle: Absolutely and we have hosted them, those group, at our home, my wife and I because she used to work on Capitol Hill.

Zha: And they come to my school and my program.

Haenle: Those are very, very important and I think they have a big impact. Well let's dive in and talk about U.S.-China relations. I want to get a sense of your impression of the summit that just took place between President Trump and President Xi at Mar-a-Lago. Ahead of the summit you wrote in an article that quote "an uneventful meet up is going to be a successful one" and you argued in your article that China and the United State should avoid dramatic rhetoric and emphasis a positive relationship. What is your sense? How did we do?

Zha: On balance, frankly speaking, I think that the summit went beyond my expectations. The lead up to the summit, was very complex and challenging for both sides and frankly speaking, probably in terms of the rhetorical environment for these two teams, one from the White House, one from the Zhong Nan Hai. I think both sides had reasons to project themselves as the underdog part, and both sides were facing a powerful, even though unspoken question: Why are you meeting after all? Because the issues and the options presented were so outstandingly conflictual. I do feel the way it ended and the announcement made tried to project the image of stability and I think the totality of the meeting, the result of the meeting is that, they are ready to work with each other. The most substantial outcome of the meeting is the announcement of these four sets of dialogue. I do know there are skeptics.

Haenle: Before we talk about that, let me back up. Because you raised an important point that many people: Are we ready for this meeting? Why are we doing it now? I think it would be very helpful for the listeners of this China and the World Podcast, which is a broad international audience, to hear your perspectives of the context of the summit in China broader domestic and foreign policy environment. So, why did the summit matter for President Xi? In terms of the event taking place in Beijing this year, in terms of the 19th Party Congress which will take place in the fall, and also in terms of President Xi foreign policy agenda for the next six months. What do you see as President Xi's aim for the summit? And how does and his priority going forward in the meeting in Florida.

Zha: Well. To the extent that I know—just me as a professor and an observer, I speak for myself only. I would think for Mr. Xi, the summit, a successful summit, however you define it, is useful for at least four, we can explain the utility be referring to four dimension of Chinese politics, domestic politics. First and foremost it is the anticorruption campaign that is beyond argument the hallmark of Mr. Xi's political success at home. The United States been the most active in returning to China the fugitives that's on the so-called Skynet list: the hundred.

Haenle: These are Chinese that have committed crimes and have fled China and gone international and many in the United States

Zha: Many were high-ranking officials or you know low-ranking officials, what we call "big tigers" or "small flies". That's where, why you go to the United States in the first place. The Americans are not helping.

Haenle: So that's an important part of it?

Zha: Very important part. I think he got on the plane, flew to Florida, with a bit of a risk of face for further domestic criticism.

Haenle: One of the pillars of the U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue, which is now the new U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue: the new repackage format, is a pillar on cyber and on law enforcement issues and this gets at your point about fugitives.

Zha: In the domestic context, he is under very heavy pressure to show he can deliver because so many Chinese officials at different levels of government and society have successfully fled to the West. And of course there are long list of legal and treaty issues. I'm not accusing Americans. I'm a scholar, I know better. But as politician, Xi has to face the question. Ok, you go, you have to proactively go to Florida, what are the Americans giving you back? That's one point. Another dimension, will be domestically, that he can handle the region relationship because South China Sea or the THAAD problem. That's the missile develop program in South Korea. There are lots of voices in China, how we have handled this, how we could handle all of these matters differently. But know you have a new president in the United States, a new secretary of state—I'm talking about Rex Tillerson, who had a very explicitly word version of policy toward the South China Sea and U.S. policies. Yes, but I really trying to say that there is that demand from the Chinese political circle, that demand something like this: Ok, Mr. Xi, why don't you go and talk the Americans leadership face-to-face but you still have the responsibility on your shoulder that they listen to you.

Haenle: That you can get regional orders and a better a positon for China?

Zha: That right. I think that's a second dimension. A third dimension has to do with trade. I think trade comes in third. Most Chinese understand that you should look at the actual companies that are conducting the trade between China and the United States. The main strip of those companies are not Chinese: they are American, Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, and we have the Hong Kong conduit. So Americans can be mad with China over these trade deficits, U.S. deficit, and Chinese surplus. We have round-after-round, year-after-year, people easily forget. You should remember, you were in the White House. In the first term of the Bush White House, the two government actually set up a group meeting, to look at the trade statistics.

Haenle: You're talking about the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade, JCCT.

Zha: That's a 3rd or a no, a 4th one we made deal with rather quick. Mr. Xi [needs to] prove that he can get relationship with the United States to be going in a stable way, otherwise China's probability in terms of hosting the One Belt One Road Conference that is going to be in mid-May, will be put into question. So there is a lot at stake for him to go.

Haenle: Now looking at the outcome in that contexts, from that perspective, how did President Xi do? In a domestic Chinese, Chinese domestic context? In the aftermath of the trip, how has it been accessed? A success?

Zha: I don't know...if...it will take a few more days for me to talk to people to get a better sense but I think a lot of observers, including his critics, were probably taken aback by the coincidence and the timing of the meeting and the firing of missiles towards Syria.

Haenle: Ok. So let's talk about that. President Xi was probably surprised, I think at the dinner at the first evening when President Trump told him that the United States had just concluded a missile strike. 59 tomahawks to be exact on a Syrian airfield and the Syria airfield was the one that was responsible for the recent chemical weapon attack. So how did this affect the summit from your view? From a Chinese context?

Zha: I personally do not think, let me make it clear, I personally do not think this was meant to be a message toward to China. Why? It's an American tradition, let's say, Trump's White House like every other American institution is quite resourceful. It can do multiple things at the same time and if you look at the American journalist when you have foreign visits, they normally prioritize inquiries into domestic issues. Syria is not a major China concern. We traditionally voted along with the Russia on such matters and I doubt this will be perceived that way. I don't see it that way.

Haenle: So some in China. I think you're implying that some in China, believed that the Trump administration deliberately timed the attack to take place while Xi was there to send a message to China and possibly to send a message to China about U.S. policy on the North Korea. In terms of what is China can do, its capabilities, and what it is willing to do in terms of taking military actions.

Zha: Many do. Many do. I don't. Many do. If I can summarize what I have read and heard from those Chinese who link the missile strike on Syria and whatever message was meant for China. It begins with those arguments, being with a kind of cultural explanation. Here in Asia or China, when you are hosting guests you know you don't shout at your dog. You want this to be smooth. You don't want an unrelated surprise.

Haenle: So it can be considered disrespectful in that context. That is something I have heard Chinese friends that I have talked to and Chinese scholars who I have talked to.

Zha: That's a very basic requirement of edict. When you receive guests. That one argument. I think that goes very deep among those Chinese who are just Chinese, who are not very into U.S.-China relations. And now the layers these so called message for China, probably goes a lot more, a lot further, than just over North Korea. There is a deeper sense of disquiet on a number of issues that say, it is not about military strike. It is the determination, the willingness to act, and it's the delivery of an action without prior notices. The combination of all that. Unilateralism if you would. So lots of Chinese are probably very concerned about if this was the pattern, what would happen on issues like U.S. promise to help Japan or protect Japan on Senkaku Islands. Should the Japanese move, because the Japanese have a plan to inhabitant these offshore islands, if the Chinese were to get into a clash, what would the Americans do? Would the American action be in a similar manner? Taiwan of course. The South China Sea and I don't really think on North Korea we need to receive another message. For those of us who have been working on this China relations and we talk about North Korea all the time and it is possible to summarize the sentiments

around those Chinese and Americans who know the situation to be the following: China has less impact on North Korea behavior than what is generally portrayed outside of China. But China can do more to try to influence North Korea than what has already been done. That's probably where we are. Now point two is that a big variable in all of this is South Korea because the South Koreans can do a whole lot, and of course given the current situations of political instability in South Korea. The Chinese relationship with South Korea is sort of turning from a few years of warmth to a few years...it is a very complicated situation.

Haenle: I hear a lot of people say that one of Presidents Xi's goals, while he was in Mar-a-Lago, is to be perceived, be seen in China, from the Chinese audience as an equal to the U.S. president. Putting the China and the United States on equal footing. So have said that potential this action, the ability of the United States to simply reach out and strike Syria somehow impacted President Xi's to look as though he is an equal, clearly the United States is the only country that can take unilateral actions like that. How do you react to something like that? You see that in the press right now quite about bit.

Zha: The Chinese press are people who interpret things in their own ways but the sentiment in my reading is probably more accurate in describing Mr. Xi's wishes when he went to the Sunnylands to meet up with President Obama, former President Obama.

Haenle: In June of 2013.

Zha: Right. I would say after those many meetings with former President Obama, after having being in his seat to handle the U.S.-China relationship, since then and after listening and being on the receiving end of Mr. Trump tweets. I doubt...he would be extremely foolish to have that kind of expectation going to Florida. Think his expectation going to Florida was just trying to stabilize it.

Haenle: Let me ask you a couple more questions. I know you got class. Quickly. You mentioned the new U.S.-China Comprehensive Dialogue as one of the outcomes and in a recent ChinaFile conversation—both you and I participated in it. And you had said in your article that you supported keeping the Strategic and Economic Dialogue as a formal communication channel. They have announced that they are going to repack it. It is going to split into four dialogues headed by the two presidents, as I understand it. What do you think of that kind of announcement? Do you think this is just a repacking? Or do you think that there will be significant differences in the, and an improvement, the way that it was down in the past.

Zha: I hope this is going to turn out to be an improvement. I hope. I emphasize that why? Because we cannot just be talking about the United States and China, we cannot just be talking about the White House and Zhong Nan Hai on a daily basis. You were in the White House. You know this much better. You have these corresponding agencies and these Chinese and American agencies right now do not correspond with each other very well.

Haenle: It is hard to find your direct counterpart.

Zha: This Henry Kissinger question: "Who do I call up on the other side?"

Haenle: Very different systems. Different systems, different bureaucrats.

Zha: So actually one of the things we need out of the dialogue, the track II dialogue group I just mentioned, we recommended for China and the United State to appoint a commerce of wise men or so, to begin communicating with each other.

Haenle: In the administration or outside the administration?

Zha: Outside the administration. These would not be people who would be held bureaucratically responsible but be out there, be tasked to explore various options. I don't know how this report is being taken by both governments as such. But then the point here is the preparation for any of these dialogue formats is really what matters. It would be a, now with one of these comprehensive dialogues being chaired by heads of states the stakes will be much higher. So I hope as the White House fills its China or Asia desks they will be moving more of a routine of preparations.

Haenle: This can be good forcing functions to get things down. As you prepare for it. One of the things I've also heard this is not going to be as many officials and sort of streamline it and make them kind of more outcome orientated or results orientated.

Zha: Beginning with the setting of the agenda, this is less of an opportunity for officials on either side just to speak up in 5 minutes presentation by an official on a talk and one to the next one is a total waste of time. We realized that.

Haenle: Going into the summit, President Trump appeared very zero-sum, very zero-sum approach, very hostile. A lot of bluster, a lot of brash language, but the tone that seemed to be set coming out of it is different. His granddaughter, Ivanka's daughter, serenaded President Xi in mandarin with Molihua. Trump hailed the meeting as produce tremendous progress. He said...President Trump said he believes a lot of potential bad problems of the relationship will be going away. What do you make of this?

Zha: Well, he is learning to, Mr. Trump is learning to be more presidential. I think after 90 days of listen and watching him in action, more and more folks on the Chinese side kind of take his message seriously but every wording or the temperament. Not every tweet. But then Mr. Tillerson and others have probably done an effective job in relating to this Chinese side in preparation for the summit. The last thing, I would also think, China, the Chinese leadership beginning through the election—the election eve when it was getting clear Mr. Trump was going to win—there were clear instructions from the very top to refrain from willful comments on Mr. Trump himself or his administration. That's stayed on. It helped the leadership on the Chinese side to let's say project an official version of what the Trump administration is. But we also have very active social media. But down the road I would think, I mean in reality, I would think very few here in China actually see, maybe that they just mean the bias when the... we are in constant, many of us are in constant conversation with the Americans about it. I think at least among those who are in the know never expected that management of the ties to be so difficult or so out of control. For better or for worse, we are in constant contact. You should look at the history of these interactions, most of Americans and Chinese are amendable and they both have demonstrate a good measure of pragmatism.

Haenle: President Xi said after the summit that China was ready to work with Trump to push forward China-U.S. relations from a new starting point and there are a thousand reasons to make it work and no reason to break it.

Zha: Right, he said it very beautifully and very rhetorically, but I would think the way Mr. Trump changed his tone may be politically costly for him in the domestic context. But hopefully this is the beginning of a process of pragmatic interactions of actually substantial interactions away from media headlines. And then after all, it's the actually practitioners of the relationship that need to have a quite environment to work out whatever difference. But I don't actually think the difference are that fundamental.

Haenle: Well time will tell, and I want to thank you for spending time with the listeners of the China and the World Podcast.

Zha: I hoped this helped.

Haenle: It helps very much and we hope to be able to come back to you as we go further along in the U.S.-China relationship and engage again.

Zha: It is my pleasure. Thank you for having me on the program.

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