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Interview – Jonathan Fulton

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Jonathan Fulton is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. He is a Non-resident Senior Fellow for the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs and the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative. He received his PhD from the University of Leicester, where his dissertation focused on Chinese relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council member states. He also holds degrees from Staffordshire University, the University of Southern Queensland, and Dalhousie University. His research focuses on China-Middle East relations and international relations of the Persian Gulf. His books include *China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (2019), *Routledge Handbook of China-Middle East Relations* (2022), and *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security* (2023). He is the host of The China-MENA Podcast.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My field is primarily the international relations of China, the Middle East, and North Africa. I have lived in Abu Dhabi since 2006 and have watched this firsthand for nearly two decades. When I started working on this topic, there was very little work on China-MENA relations, and what was out there was primarily descriptive. This was mainly because the way people thought about the topic was reduced to a transactional 'energy-for-goods' logic. The MENA region was perceived as oriented towards the West, with little space for other actors to play a more prominent role, so there wasn't much interesting theorizing.

Now, we're into an order transition at the global level, fundamentally impacting regional orders. The Middle East is no exception, and the regional political, ideological, and economic pressures shaping events create much more space for extra-regional actors to be more consequential. And that leads to much more interesting work about China-MENA relations. You can bring securitization, international political economy, regionalism, alignment strategies, and power/order transition theories. It makes for a fascinating lab to work on different international relations questions.

The most interesting debate now is on the normative level. Over the past few years, China has announced a series of initiatives like the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative that aim to present alternatives to the existing Western liberal order. I'm writing this in January 2024, and over the past few months, the regional frustration with the status quo has been evident – the war in Gaza feels like it could be a pivotal moment. That's not to say there is a preference for China's vision for an international order, but that there is a hunger for change, and it's worth watching how Beijing uses these initiatives to develop normative alignment and practices on global governance issues. I suspect we will see some fascinating constructivist work on China-MENA relations coming through the pipes soon.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

This is the easiest question to answer for me. Spending most of my adult life in countries other than my native Canada has fundamentally shaped my thinking on international politics. Since 1998, I've lived and worked in Taiwan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates. I studied political science and history as an undergrad, but by the time I graduated, I hadn't seen much of the world outside of where I grew up, in Eastern Canada.

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Shortly after graduating, I went to Taiwan to teach English as a second language, and it was a transformational experience. Living in a foreign environment, having your assumptions challenged every day, and trying to see how international events look from a different cultural perspective was an invaluable education. Usually, people do this for a year or two and go home, but 25 years later, I'm still at it. I teach political science in the United Arab Emirates, and being in a classroom every day, talking about politics with Emirati students, thinking through their questions or the challenges to my ideas, can't help but give me a different way of looking at things.

What trends involving Beijing's role in the region have changed the most since you started researching this topic? How has China's view of the Gulf evolved and vice versa?

The biggest shift is how the US-China relationship has deteriorated. Changes in that bilateral play out on every consequential issue here, whether it's the current war in Gaza, attacks on shipping on the Red Sea, or Saudi Arabia's nascent nuclear energy program. Until the Trump administration's trade war with China, Beijing seemed content to continue free-riding under the US security architecture in the Gulf. China was getting everything it needed in the region at minimal cost.

The trade war signaled that China couldn't free-ride indefinitely, which likely recalibrated how Chinese leaders viewed the region. They still have significant interests here and must adjust their policies about securing them. Also, the Trump administration's approach to Iran represented a serious change. The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or Iran nuclear deal, and subsequent 'maximum pressure' campaign resulted in a much more aggressive Iran. Around that time, we started to see Chinese leaders challenging American policies and leadership in the region using much more forceful language and much more frequently. They went from seeing the US as an actor that helped secure their interests to one that might undermine them.

Beijing continues to see the Gulf and broader Middle East the same way it long has – as a region where it is first and foremost an economic actor. Energy, trade, and contracting are the biggest drivers of China's regional presence, although its economic engagement has become more diverse over the last decade. But it is also a critical region, and China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is all about connecting markets, makes the Middle East an important hub.

As for how regional actors see China, it's an interesting question. China is still essentially the new kid on the block. There is not a lot of serious thinking about China in the region – you don't see Chinese studies programs at universities, except, I guess, in Israel and Iran. There aren't a lot of think tanks or institutes devoted to China, either. It is primarily seen in transactional terms, as far as I can tell – it offers a lot economically, technologically, and without political conditionality. However, there is an expectation that it should step up and play a bigger role diplomatically and politically; in this, I think there will be some disappointment. China has been quite open about its reluctance to get meaningfully involved in regional problems.

Could China's recent economic slowdown and oil's diminishing role in the energy market put China-Gulf relations in crisis?

I don't think a crisis is the proper characterization. China rolled out a framework for cooperating with Arab countries in 2014, the 1+2+3 cooperation pattern. Each number represents a different facet of cooperation: 1 is hydrocarbons; 2 is trade, investment, and infrastructure construction; and 3 is renewables, nuclear energy, space satellite and technology. Over the last decade, there has been substantial development in all of these, to the point that its economic presence here is now about a lot more than energy and trade.

A slowdown would make more of an impact if it were just a matter of China buying oil. Of course, the size of its market means every country is sensitive or vulnerable to the vicissitudes of China's economy. However, other important countries, like India, Japan, South Korea, and some ASEAN nations, have deep economic relations with the Gulf. A slower Chinese economy would hurt, but it would not be a crisis.

This year, Iran joined the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Did this choice benefit Beijing or Tehran more? Will countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council join this organization as fully-fledged

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members in the future?

I'm writing a paper on Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) right now, so you have good timing with this question. At this point, it's clear that Iran has gotten the better end of the deal. Tehran gets the legitimacy of full membership in a large international organization when it has few positive achievements. The Iranian government can say to its people, 'Look, the West doesn't respect us, but we're partners with three of the world's biggest countries: China, Russia, and India.' I think that's important to leaders in Tehran, even if it doesn't do much for Iran in material terms. This could change if the SCO starts normalizing trading in national currencies rather than the US dollar. This option is on the table, mainly because of sanctions on Russia and Iran.

However, just last month, Iran and Pakistan launched missiles into each other's territory. This issue has caused headaches for the SCO. A security-based international organization should operate under the norm of members not using military force against each other. In broader geopolitical terms, having Iran join makes for a more complex dynamic within the SCO; most of its members have strong ties to Iran's GCC rivals and are not likely to look favorably at Iranian aggression in the Gulf.

As for GCC countries becoming full members, it has historically been a long process. Iran, for example, had been trying to join the SCO since 2005. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE became dialogue partners last year – which means they can only join meetings on specific issues they have identified as ones where they want to work with the SCO. The next step would be to become an observer state, which was the path for Iran, Pakistan, and India. Whether that's on the table, I think a cost-benefit analysis of SCO membership for them makes it unlikely. The organization has not provided much in the way of tangible outcomes in recent years, so there aren't significant club goods to make it worthwhile. That has to be measured against the fact that each GCC state has dense relations with the US and would not want to jeopardize these by joining an international organization founded and led by Washington's main strategic competitors.

When considering the purposes with which the BRI was announced by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013, what do you think were the most significant successes and failings?

Regarding its successes, it has certainly changed the way we think of and discuss China as an international actor. David Shambaugh published a significant book in 2013, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. Coincidentally, this was the same year that the BRI was announced. His thesis was that China had not accomplished much in most measures of international power (military, diplomatic, global governance, cultural, or even economic), although he did acknowledge it as a trading superpower. Five years later, in 2018, the BRI's momentum made the narrative arc look different; most people accepted China as a major global power. In 2023, some of the structural weaknesses of China as an international power have been made evident, and Shambaugh's thesis looked stronger. However, its perception has changed. Ten years ago, people rarely mentioned China when discussing strategic affairs in MENA, but it has become part of every conversation today.

In real terms, the BRI has been uneven, as one would expect of something so vaguely defined. In relatively wealthy and stable countries like the GCC members, the BRI appears in joint statements that they put out with China, and it has been a valuable way to frame cooperation. In Pakistan, however, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was once seen as a major component of the BRI, it hasn't lived up to expectations. It seems like Beijing hasn't always paid enough attention to local conditions when announcing BRI projects, and the underlying premise – that development is the solution to instability – is insufficient.

How do you evaluate China's diplomatic role in the current Israel-Hamas war? You recently told the BBC that "China is not a serious actor on this issue. Talking to people around the region, nobody expects China to contribute to the solution." Can you expand on this idea?

First and foremost, the Israel-Palestine conflict does not resonate in China the same way it does in Western democracies. Partly, this is because of the historical experience of Western involvement in contributing to and prolonging the conflict. Partly, it is because many Western democracies have large Jewish or Arab populations who

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see this as an important issue. As a result, it becomes a critical policy consideration for governments and political parties. In China, there's not a significant constituency that cares about this conflict in the same visceral way, so the Chinese Communist Party doesn't have to approach it the same way a political party in France or the US would. And since the conflict is largely seen as a problem the West made, China isn't expected to solve it.

If you take these factors together, I think it becomes clear that China's Communist Party perceives the Gaza war as a purely geopolitical issue. Since Beijing knows Israel will favor the US over China, the CCP leaders don't have to worry about alienating a potential partner. If their position aligns with what Arab governments and societies want, they can use this issue to gain support from a large bloc of Arab League states in international forums like the United Nations. These countries have often backed Chinese positions like its policy in Xinjiang. In addition, China's response to the Hamas attack was very disappointing to Israel. Chinese officials did not refer to Hamas' terrorism as a trigger for the war and essentially blamed Israeli policies and US support. As a result, I don't think it can play much of a role in working toward a solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict; it has lost credibility with the Israeli side.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Read a lot of history, travel if you can, and stay curious.