

Critical Issues Confronting China Series featuring Jessica Chen Weiss
– A World Safe for Autocracy: The Domestic Politics of China's Foreign Policy, April 21, 2021

– [Mark Grady] Hello everyone and welcome to today's Critical Issues Confronting China lecture, featuring Jessica Chen Weiss from Cornell. We will get started momentarily. We're gonna wait about another minute just to give people a chance to log on. And after that, we'll get started. Thank you so much for joining us.

– Welcome everyone to the Fairbank Center's weekly presentation on Critical Issues for Contemporary China. It's a pleasure to introduce professor Jessica Chen Weiss. She's an associate professor at Cornell after having previously taught at Yale. She's also an editor at "The Washington Post" Monkey Cage blog. She received her BA from Stanford and her PhD from the University of California, San Diego. Her dissertation won the American Political Science Association's Award for Best Dissertation in International Relations. And that became her first book, "Powerful Patriots: National Protest in China's Foreign Relations". Her second book, forthcoming, is called "A World Safe for Autocracy: The Domestic Politics of China's Foreign Policy". She's going to tell us about that subject today. Welcome Professor Weiss.

– I'm going to jump in really quickly and just talk about Q&A, because I hope we'll have lots of questions. If you want to do Q&A, there's a tab in the bottom of your screen. You can enter your questions in there. If you don't feel comfortable sharing your name and affiliation with us, there's an anonymous box. So please check that. If not, please let us know who you are and where you're from. All right, thank you.

– Thanks so much for having me here today, and it's a particular treat to appear in this series in honor of Ezra Vogel, whose leadership and mentorship meant so much to all those who participated in the National Committee on U.S. China Relations Public Intellectuals Program. Not long before he passed, we had an email exchange where he encouraged us to contribute, particularly at this moment, a great moment of great flux in US-China relations and a key moment for the United States in particular to decide on a new trajectory concerning China. So it's really with some sadness, but also pleasure that I am able to join you today. So thanks for having me. So today I'd like to talk about my new book project on the domestic politics of Chinese foreign policy and what might lie ahead for US-China relations. And an increasingly prevalent view holds that the United States and China are perhaps at the precipice or already in a new cold war. And in this view, China is a revisionist that poses an existential threat to US hegemony and the existing international order, defined as the institutions, norms, and practices that make up global governance. At the same time, others have been much more sanguine that China's integration into the international system has worked, at least so far. There's been no

major war in east Asia in decades. And if you could imagine the counterfactual. Had the United States not normalized relations with China or excluded it from the system, what would the world today look like? And some have even argued that the major problem has been China's free-riding or failure to contribute enough to the system. Yet in recent years, we've also seen far greater variation in China's international behavior across different issue areas than is implied either by the term revisionist or stakeholder. In some international institutions, China has been a conservative defender, such as the UN Charter. At the same time, China has opposed others, like the International Criminal Court and rejected the standing of the International Tribunal on the South China Sea. And indeed, sometimes the Chinese government has appeared more invested in defending the existing international institutions than even the United States under the Trump administration. Hence, the irony of Xi Jinping appearing to defend free trade and the WTO at Davos, as well as cooperation on the coronavirus at the same time as the Trump administration moved to pull out of the WHO and attacked NATO. And in one of the most important areas of global governance, climate change, we've seen a reversal over time in China's stance, from obstructionism at Copenhagen to leadership at Paris in the space of just a few years. And so this variation is consistent with an important article recently published by Ian Johnston, where he notes that China interacts differently with different orders, different parts of the international order, supportive of some, unsupportive of others, and partially supportive of still others. And importantly, he provides a description analysis of this rather than an explanation for this variation. I think it's important to note also that any placement of China in any of these boxes doesn't fully capture the evolution or the domestic contestation over how China has approached different issue areas, both in terms of its rhetoric on the international stage, but also its behavior, because underneath the Chinese communist party's grand slogans under Xi Jinping of a China dream or a shared future for mankind there's really significant issue by issue variation in China's attitude and behavior toward the international order. So the purpose centrally of my book is to account for this variation. So the starting premise of my argument is that the CCP is first and foremost concerned with its domestic survival in office with Xi Jinping currently at the helm. Of course this is not its only ambition, but it's perhaps most important one, because there's very little that the CCP could get done if not in power. And in particular, the CCP has been deathly afraid of what might be termed peaceful evolution and contagion from overseas of democratic movements. Around the world, most communist states have collapsed, and the CCP today is very afraid of going the way of the others. So as I've written in foreign affairs, the CCP's overarching goal is regime survival and a world safe for autocracy. And it's important to note that survival is about more than just repression. It's also about performance, providing not just bread but also circuses if you will, to bolster domestic support through persuasion as well as cooptation. So performance matters. So my book identifies

two characteristics, centrality and contestation, that shape the domestic politics of a given issue and its variation along these two different dimensions that helps shape China's interests and investments, both domestically and internationally. So what are these two dimensions? First centrality. Since the late 1970s, the CCP has really relied on the central pillars of nationalism, economic performance, and stability to justify its continued authoritarian rule. As Mao declared, "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up." And particularly as the last two Chinese regimes were ousted by nationalist movements, the CCP leadership has been especially concerned about defending the nation's sovereignty against foreign encroachment and returning China to the status and privileges of a great power. Second is economic growth in the post-Mao era. The CCP has used growth in a litany of economics statistics, particularly GDP, to claim its competence and to justify its rule. And so under Deng Xiaoping, the CCP moved away from communist ideology as a barometer of good performance to, you know, slogans such as "To get rich is glorious," and "Black or white as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat." And finally, the CCP has emphasized public security, the ability to deliver the citizenry from disease, disaster, crime, and terror are one, keeping these at bay as a central pillar of its continued legitimacy. So what does this mean then for China's foreign policy and international affairs? It's on issues that are linked tightly to these central pillars like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and territorial maritime disputes that China has been hyperactive in making demands, insisting on its preferences even when these have led to international censure, such as the rejection of the international tribunal ruling on the South China Sea. And it's when international pressure has aimed at toppling these pillars or even changing regime itself that international pressure has been especially likely to backfire, both heightening the CCP's domestic insecurity and rallying domestic audiences around the CCP's leadership. But not all issues are central, and less central issues like international peacekeeping and most issues before the United Nations, the Chinese government has been considerably more flexible, often reluctant to exercise its solo veto, and it's on these issues, such as international pressure on the Asian infrastructure investment bank, that the Chinese government shifted, showed a flexibility adopting rhetoric about the environment and social consequences of its policies under pressure to conform with norms of those by developed countries. Similarly on that sustainability, the IMF applauded China's announcement of a debt sustainability framework in response to international criticism of the belt and road initiative. Some features of centrality, the greater the centrality of an international issue is to the CCP's domestic legitimacy, the more I expect the Chinese government to rely on performance and not just repression in trying to address the issue. Oppression is still possible, as I'll discuss in a minute, but international pressure that appears aimed at these pillars or touches on the CCP's legitimacy is likely to generate some kind of domestic performance to showcase the government's nationalist

credentials. And this kind of pressure is more likely to backfire. And in turn, what this suggests is that the more central a domestic issue is, the more likely the government might have potential bargaining leverage. Of course, it may also be willing to go it alone in defiance of international norms and institutions, but it is also likely, if others view China's contributions indispensable, China's more likely to have leverage to demand international reforms on those issues or, you know, to build a separate and like-minded coalition of states to advance its views in an alternative set of institutions. Now ultimately whether or not these investments and central issues suggest greater cooperation or conflict depends really upon the prevailing norms and practices in that given issue area, and how willing other stakeholder or parties are to make concessions to China's domestic imperatives. So what I provided here is a framework for understanding the domestic drivers of China's investment in what for example, Scott Kastner, Margaret Pearson and Chad Rector call a rising powers outside options which determine then whether or not China is likely to be able to demand changes to a particular system or a sector of global governance. But I think it's important to note that these central pillars, nationalism, growth, and domestic stability are often in tension with one another. And so managing these domestic pressures and what you might call contradictions is often a pretty risky bet. It means also that an issue that touches on one central pillar does not necessarily mean that the government is unable to make concessions. So for example, Taylor Fravel shows in his work that the CCP has been willing to make territorial compromises with a neighboring state in order to shore up its domestic security and control over minority populations in that border region. Take another example, China's changing stance in international discussions on carbon emissions also illustrates an international issue that touches on two different central pillars. On the one hand economic growth, and the other hand public stability. So initially the CCP viewed international efforts to limit carbon emissions as really threatening domestic economic growth. And the CCP acted as a spoiler in the Copenhagen discussion. It wasn't until the scale of the domestic pollution catastrophe was revealed, you know, triggering both elite and mass outrage, that the Chinese government ended up shifting strategies, ultimately investing in international efforts to limit carbon emissions. Public health and stability came to the fore during we might call the airpocalypse. As Xi Jinping, explicitly noted, "Our environmental problems have reached such severe levels that if not handled well, they most often easily incite mass incidents," the CCP's terminology for mass protests. Another example of an issue that the trade-off at the CCP faces in managing different conflicting central pillars is the possibility of nationalist mobilization, as I looked at in my first book. So grassroots outcry can help the CCP showcase its resolve and demonstrate that China won't be pushed around on a given issue area that can strengthen the CCP's nationalist credentials, but it also comes at a risk or cost to domestic stability. And so this is a domestic dilemma between two central pillars that I've argued

international context can help adjudicate. Moving on to the question of contestation, the other dimension of my framework. Contestation reflects the simple fact that even authoritarian like China masks incredible domestic division and heterogeneity at both the elite as well as mass level, often, you know, deriving from geographic, economic, institutional, as well as ideological divisions within society. So even in authoritarian systems like China's, power is fragmented and is contested. Central and local leaders face different incentives, different levels of information. There's pervasive principal agent problems and central decisions and slogans must be interpreted by agents at the local level. And oftentimes powerful industries and economic interests are far from faithful agents of the state. We can't understand, for example, China's response to the outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan without reference to these domestic central local divisions. Had the CCP at the top known earlier of the extent of human to human transmission, for example, it would likely have acted much sooner to contain the outbreak, but instead local government efforts to quash potential panic and disruption on the eve of important political meetings ultimately ended up stymieing national level efforts to kind of grasp the scale of the emergency, and by then it was really too late. Another interesting thing about the pandemic is that it revealed the trade offs and order of priorities in the CCP's domestic priorities. Stability first. The CCP allowed, at the outset of the pandemic, allowed the Chinese economy to contract for the first time in decades and even crack down on conspiracy theories about the US origins of the coronavirus. And it was only once the outbreak was under control inside China that the government moved to restart the economy as well as fully embrace conspiracy theories about the foreign origins or possible foreign origins of the virus, going on a propaganda drive to boast about China's superior response and the inadequacy of other government responses to COVID-19. What are the international implications, then, of this international, sorry, this domestic contestations and fragmentation. So first, the more contested an international issue is domestically, the more likely we are to see problems with implementation and enforcement of China's international commitments. So take, for example in the environment, local officials have often resisted central instructions to shut down polluting firms, regarding economic development as still being a primary significance in cadre promotion evaluation. Similarly, when state leaders set out a direction but ultimately leave specifics to be hashed out under a general campaign or slogan, oftentimes it's these concentrated domestic interests that end up dominating both the design and implementation of the policy process. So for example, recent research by Vinyun Ang suggests that the Belt and Road initiative, Xi Jinping's signature initiative has largely provided an encompassing but vague slogan. That quote "makes it easy for domestic interest groups to use national policy as a cover to pursue their own agenda." So putting these together, centrality and contestation, these two different dimensions, some highly central issues are also highly contested, like

climate policy or internet governance, exchange rates, et cetera, but some issues are highly central but characterized by much lower degrees of domestic contestation, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Some issues are characterized by low centrality as well as low contestation. As I said, most issues before the United Nations or China's involvement in international peacekeeping, but some low centrality issues are also characterized by a high degree of contestation, like the Iran nuclear deal. So for example, Ian Johnston notes that China played an important role in the Iran nuclear deal, helping, you know redesign a key reactor to reduce Iran's future plutonium output, but at the same time trying to fail to halt the export of ballistic missile technology to Iran due to the well-connected interests of a particular arms exporter. Interestingly, I expect significant movement as domestic actors try to manipulate the apparent centrality of a given issue, particularly as they try to lobby the central government for side payments or loopholes. They may try to link their demands to a central color in order to increase the likelihood of these concessions from the central government. So in a bidding war, if you will, for government attention, subnational actors that are successfully able to link their demands to a central pillar are more likely to succeed than those whose interests remain, you know, much more peripheral and parochial. So for example, during negotiations over China's succession to the WTO, a variety of different industries, ministries, and provincial governments lobbied heavily for continued economic protection, some more successfully than others. So for example, Margaret Pearson notes that the telecommunications industry and its affiliated ministry, the ministry of information industries were much more successful by linking their demands for protection to fears of loss of sovereignty. Pearson writes that "Industry officials claim that foreign internet providers would use access to steal economic information, disseminate propaganda and support dissidents or undermine the party." Such arguments tapped into deep worries about loss of Chinese sovereignty to foreign powers and widespread fear of social unrest made such arguments especially potent. Another way in which issues can be malleable is by the government's own framing efforts, which I will take up a little bit more in a few minutes. The government may also try to increase the centrality of a given issue in order to dampen domestic dissent, as well as demonstrate resolve to international audiences. So for example, by framing the resistance or protests in Hong Kong or the US-China trade war as part of a national struggle reminiscent of the opium war, the Korean War, or other protracted disputes in which China eventually prevailed, the Chinese government has tried to build public support and raise the cost of international concessions and signal that it's unwilling to be pushed around on these issues by foreign powers. So Weiyi Shi and Zhu Boliang note in their research, the Chinese government has been successful at framing the US-China trade war as an existential struggle for the Chinese nation's development. When framed in this way, Chinese survey respondents were much more supportive of the government's handling of the trade war than when the

economic costs were mentioned. So now I wanna talk about the issues in the upper left quadrant, these high centrality, low contestation issues typically defined by sort of what is, you know, central to nationalism. And so typically these are issues that the Chinese government has called its so-called core interests, issues that are central to the CCP's nationalist credentials. The landscape of nationalism in China is really one that's both cultivated, but also kind of selectively pruned back by the state and its agents, whether that's through history textbooks, patriotic propaganda, or the media. Of course, the government isn't the only actor involved in nationalist mythmaking, if you will, but it does steer the bounds of domestic discourse to align with its domestic and international objectives. So a key question that emerges here is if nationalism is malleable or endogenous to the government's foreign policy objectives, how is it that it can have a constraining effect on decision making? So first, nationalism defines which foreign policy issues are central and which are more peripheral to the government's domestic legitimacy. So it shapes the domestic costs the government faces in navigating a crisis or foreign policy challenge. Mobilize nationalism, which I studied in my first book, "Powerful Patriots," whether that's in the streets or increasingly online, it increases the costs of concession, and it shapes the domestic decision making environment, because weak performance on issues that are central to the defense of the national interest can undermine the CCP's claim to rule. And so in this way nationalism will shape the government's domestic calculus without actually tying its hands. And also popular nationalism may provide the spark for international confrontation as Chinese netizens or internet users go global in their efforts to defend China as a controversy over the NBA illustrates. Surveys that I've conducted and drawn on others show that Chinese attitudes are generally hawkish, with a majority of respondents endorsing greater reliance on military strength, supporting greater spending on military national defense, and approving of sending troops to disputed islands in the East and South China Sea, as well as viewing the US military presence as threatening in east Asia. Now these hawkish sentiments may still affect the government's domestic calculus in managing international tensions even if popular sentiment isn't a direct driver of Chinese foreign policy. And the more that an issue resonates with national sensitivities amongst the Chinese public, as well as among elites, the more unlikely it is that foreign threats and actions are to generate this domestic pressure on Beijing to take a tough stance. China has largely managed to avoid the use of military force since 1979. So there must be other tactics the government has used to manage these public opinion costs. Sometimes these tactics can be symbolic. What I've called bluster or maybe you might call it wolf warrior diplomacy, tough but vague talk that helps appease domestic demands for a more assertive stance while also allowing the government to prioritize its economic and strategic interests in avoiding an outright conflict. So for example, in 2001, after a Chinese fighter jet collided with a US economy reconnaissance plane over the South China Sea, the Chinese government decided to

diffuse the crisis. They were mourning the, you know, the Chinese pilot one way but also repressing anti-American demonstrations, preventing the protests that had occurred two years prior after the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Similarly in 2013 when Beijing employed, announced an air defense identification zone and demanded that foreign aircraft comply with Chinese instructions when flying over the East China Sea, this was an alternative to actually using force. There's still limits to how much I think the Chinese government can mitigate these domestic costs. So a colleague of mine and I surveyed Chinese internet users before, during, and after the US military restarted freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea to try to pick up the effect of these maneuvers on public attitudes inside China. In the days following the patrols, we found an increase in disapproval of the Chinese government, suggesting that although the Chinese government chose to exercise some restraint in the moment, it did so at some domestic cost. And so for US deterrence efforts to succeed, the US, sorry, the Chinese government must be able to absorb some amount of public opinion costs for not taking action in the face of what it deems US provocations. And it suggests that in order to avoid provoking more than deterring the Chinese government foreign policies, military actions need to be carefully calibrated in order to avoid having the very effect that they might be trying to prevent. So in conclusion, the CCP has behaved strategically in my view, investing in reshaping or rejecting or defending international arrangements in issue areas that are central to its domestic rule, while being more willing to free ride or defer to international practices on issues that are less central or more peripheral to its domestic survival. So if China is simultaneously a revisionist, a reformer, a free rider, and a defender of the status quo in different issue areas, perhaps disgruntled stakeholder is a better catchphrase to sum up China's role. Now, some have looked at China's growing international influence and its more assertive efforts to secure China's so-called core interests, including territorial and maritime claims in the region and concluded that China is an existential enemy and threat to the United States and liberal democracy around the world. In my view, this is an exaggeration. As I wrote in foreign affairs, the CCP's regime of security requires a world safe for autocracy. One that is secure from the threat of democratic diffusion and foreign efforts to get the CCP to evolve. This is ultimately a nationalist vision, not a universalizing ideology for now. And in principle, a world safe for autocracy is also compatible with the world safe for democracy. So yes, the CCP is holding up its example as proof that countries can develop without democratizing. But so far, at least Beijing has not been bent on remaking other countries in its own image. Yes, Chinese companies are selling high-tech surveillance technology around the world for profit, but Beijing is not starting coups, arming communist guerrillas or invading and installing communist regimes around the world. I've argued that what the CCP has sought is survival and legitimacy, one that's premised on three different kinds of performance, nationalism, economic welfare, and

public stability. And so much of China's international behavior reflects the spillover effects of China's domestic investments. Sometimes the spillover effects are positive, as in the case of Chinese investments in solar technology, renewables, that lower for everybody at the cost of going green. But at other times, China's investments domestically have had very negative externalities, at least from the perspective of many of those outside, including China's export of surveillance technology and demands that the NBA and other foreign companies engage in self-censorship to operate in the Chinese market. So taking seriously the heterogeneity of Chinese ideas and interests, I think ultimately means recognizing that what China wants is ultimately a contested as well as constantly moving target. And we should be aware of easy historical analogies or comparisons to, for example, Stalin's Soviet Union. For US policy, what does this imply, what kinds of international pressure are likely to succeed, and what kinds of pressure are likely to fail or backfire? First, if an issue is central, but not contested, I think shifting Chinese behavior on such issues is going to require a countervailing but equally powerful central incentive for cooperation, which has become increasingly difficult as China has become more powerful and less asymmetrically dependent on access to foreign markets and inputs. And on central issues, in my view, foreign governments must be especially concerned about counterproductive pressure, which could provoke rather than deter. So take, for example, the issue of Hong Kong, where international condemnation and sanctions appear to have been no match for the CCP's fear of democratic contagion and what it sees as a separatist threat to national sovereignty. And if anything, the CCP has invoked foreign influence to justify its increasingly repressive policies, including the national security law. So an alternative US policy really ought to aim at preserving and strengthening the city's vitality while ensuring that any retaliatory sanctions ultimately do no harm to Hong Kong, as former US consul general in Hong Kong Kurt Tong has written. It would be more useful to reinvigorate asylum policies to help refugees from Hong Kong as well as ethnic minorities persecuted in Xinjiang and elsewhere resettle in the United States or elsewhere. At the same time, I noted that even central issues can still be managed to keep tension short of conflict, such as Taiwan and the East and South China Sea. And I suggest, my research suggests the importance of oftentimes symbolic performance in the form of propaganda and rhetoric for creating short-term flexibility while also acknowledging the importance of and potentially counterproductive role of highly visible public pressure by outsiders on these domestically sensitive issues. Now issues where Chinese interests domestically are more divided create many more opportunities for foreign governments to try to play one strong constituency off the other. So this worked, for example, I think, on winning the appreciation where US led multilateral pressure on the currency issue helped accelerate the speed of removing appreciation for a time between 2005 and 2012. As I note with a coauthor, even if the CCP ultimately had to compensate what you might call the domestic losers of this appreciation with

subsidies and other policies to offset the pain economically. And so such a strategy isn't about getting China to do something that's not in China's interest, but about getting China to do something that's in the interest of some powerful domestic constituencies while still minimizing the opposition of others. And whether this is feasible I think ultimately depends on the relative balance of power among competing domestic interests. So for example, on currency appreciation, there were powerful actors on both sides, but on other issues, one domestic actor might have a outside stake in the outcome. So capturing or dominating the policy process without much opposition from other less vested interests. So for example, the Chinese military's interest in continuing to use land mines drove the government's refusal to sign the Ottawa treaty despite international pressure, as Ian Johnston notes. And on internet governance, as Molly Roberts shows in her research, censorship acts like a regressive tax, with elites having the means to bypass the great firewall, while less wealthy or less educated systems don't, and many, even up to half of the Chinese internet population not even being aware of the great firewall's existence. And so in cases where the powerful don't suffer and the less powerful have little ability to mobilize demand changes, it's not a likely candidate for this kind of a web strategy. Ultimately I think international pressure tends to be most effective on low centrality issues. And then if an issue is not central and it's not particularly contested, I think international actors mobilizing pressure to persuade China to go along with an external consensus such as the Asian infrastructure investment bank or debt sustainability is relatively likely to succeed unless there's a powerful domestic actor that has captured policy. And in such cases where there are those domestic actors, international actors will need to be aware of the likelihood of domestic side payments or loopholes that enable the Chinese government to meet these international commitments. So taking stock, what does China's rise mean for the future of international order? I expect most friction on so-called core interest issues like Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, but at the same time, maybe seeing those tensions, I think erupting today, but at the same time, China's domestic social purpose, if you will, doesn't require the wholesale destruction of the existing international order, even though it does favor a more conservative version, one that emphasizes Westphalian principles of sovereignty, equality, and noninterference, so within the United Nations, for example, China has sought to alter international obligations on human rights to emphasize the primacy of the state's sovereignty, oversight of civil society, and economic development above all. Yet at the same time the extra territoriality of the national security law, as well as the intimidation of overseas Chinese and academic freedoms all threaten the principle of noninterference. So if China wants to defend a return to a more Westphalian system of mutual coexistence among sovereign states, it will need to curtail what you might call sort of expressions of sharp power into other societies. Particularly as criticism of the CCP has grown abroad with the spread of the coronavirus around the world,

we've also seen a corresponding increase in the CCP's willingness to engage in "wolf warrior diplomacy," including proclaiming superior system and denigrating the response of others. And so an open question is whether the CCP will more actively try to tip the scales in other countries against democracy and toward Chinese style autocracy. So far Beijing's ideological ambitions have been much more nationalistic than they have been universalistic, even though its efforts to punish critics of the CCP have gone global in scope. To date, China's overseas assistance has largely been pragmatic about the regime type of the host country, the strings attached, or to the one China principle and not how autocratic or democratic the other government is. And to the extent that China's mass diplomacy, you know, has come with political strings, it's been demands that others praise China's efforts, not that other countries copy Chinese style authoritarianism. This could change to be sure, but I think even if the CCP ultimately embraces a more universalizing mission, it's likely to still be hamstrung by real political differences. For example, its relationship with Vietnam and their territorial dispute has not really been eased by the fact that both are normally communist. And so one of the risks, I think, and here I'll conclude, one of the risks of making ideological competition the defining kind of framework or cornerstone of US strategy is that it could lead the CCP to conclude that it needs to make common cause with other autocracies in order to assure its domestic survival, including a more concerted effort to remake other countries in China's own image. An overly ideological or values-first approach could backfire by prompting the CCP leadership to retaliate in kind, abandoning any effort that it's made so far to reassure others that as Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng stated, "We do not export ideology, nor do we intend to engage in institutional competition." Of course, there's much to criticize about the CCP's behavior from Xinjiang to Hong Kong and the South China Sea, but even well intentioned sanctions may prove self-defeating if they lead China to double down on its global efforts to intimidate dissent. And ultimately the more that the CCP leans on nationalism, especially the chauvinistic kind that has been on display lately, the more successful, sorry, the less successful it will be in its efforts to claim global leadership and attract international support. Ultimately, I think the best response to an increasingly nationalistic authoritarian China is to adopt what Ellie Y and I called an asymmetric approach. Ultimately, the task of repairing and defending democracy has to start at home, overcoming partisan polarization and racism to rebuild the power of US example. And ultimately efforts to tackle global issues, like climate change and health, will have greater benefits for repairing US influence than a head-on contest with China for influence. Especially if the United States can move past the sclerosis and the partisan polarization of the past decade, I think Americans don't need to indulge in excessive anxiety about China "eating our lunch," as the comedian Bill Maher put it. Responsible leaders and legislation may differentiate between the Chinese government and US citizens of Asian ethnicity, but recent history

suggests that heightened fear of an Asian adversary creates a permissive environment for violent attacks on anyone who looks Asian. So in mobilizing for competition with China, the United States really needs to be careful, I think, about the risks of what you might call a Pyrrhic victory, an overreaction that imperils openness and inclusion at home as well as pragmatic cooperation abroad, and particularly in areas where the United States has comparative strengths in education, innovation, and scientific research, America should be careful about not trying to out-China China. Whether it's in China or in the United States, nationalism is more likely to repel than attract followers whether it's wolf warrior diplomacy or America first. Thanks so much for your attention. And I'm looking forward to the discussion.

- Thank you very much, Jessica, wonderful presentation. Let me lead off the question session. On the one hand, China is fearful about domestic regime survival and portrays itself as a victim, emphasizing those century of humiliation. On the other hand, it's presenting itself now as a global leader, it's going to create a global group based on common interests as China sees those common interests. And there's this pretty serious tension between the portrayal as a victim and the portrayal as the new global leader replacing the United States. Do Chinese leaders sense that attention, does it bother other elements of the Chinese elite? Is there some synthesis that you see coming?

- So I think this is one of the many examples, and a really terrific example of the many kind of contradictions or tensions inside, you know, Chinese rhetoric. You know, I think, you know, some would say, the Chinese are capable of holding more than one thought in their head at the same time. So it's really, I think if we looked at different issues, the areas in which, you know, the Chinese government's rhetoric has most emphasized the issues of humiliation, victimhood, have really been on these high centrality, low contestation issues. These so-called core issues that are integral to, you know, perceived territorial integrity and nationalism. Whereas the issues on which, you know, China has sought to demonstrate a leading role, whether that's on climate change or defending free trade, ostensibly, those are areas in which China has been much more willing to proclaim leadership. Now adding it all up, of course, I think these in some ways are the two faces of resolve on the one hand and reassurance on the other. Certainly, you know, CCP rhetoric has aimed at, rhetoric and also behavior has aimed at preventing the formation of kind of a counter balancing so-called anti-China coalition. And one of the ways that it has done so is by trying to hold up and, you know, move closer to the center of the global stage, you know, whether it's the shared future for mankind or a community of common destiny. These are all appeals to shared, so-called shared values. And, you know, and at the same time, of course, using a variety of more material tools, including goodies, sticks and carrots, to try to divide and peel off different, different, different countries or different governments

from mobilizing in concert against China.

- One more question, kind of that level of generality. You mentioned elite and mass interests. Can you characterize the differences that you see between mass interests that lead to support of the central government and maybe multiple elite interests that are different?

- Well, it's, you know, again, this has to be, I think, looked at on an issue by issue basis, you know, and one of the things that I think we have seen in the CCP's governance is a desire to, you know, get out ahead of potential mass discontent, and so whenever large gaps open up between where the elite are and where policy is and where the masses are, there's often an attempt to close those where they can, of course, you know, contestation over the form of the political system is not one on which that kind of responsiveness has been allowed to take place, but more broadly, I think, of course there are differences between, you know, mass and elite attitudes. And, you know, for example, you know, surveys suggest that the elites, you know, are relatively, well elites can be defined in different ways, but, you know, elites reached by these elite surveys are often more opinionated, even more hawkish than masses. And then, you know, netizens, like the random, the nationally representative samples, masses tend to be, you know, a little bit less hawkish. But then if you look at, for example, and sort of netizens who are on average, wealthy or better educated and more urban, they too tend to be more opinionated and have more hawkish views than their mass counterparts.

- Thank you. Nermal Verma asks, what is the centrality of the land border disputes in the Himalayas?

- This is a really excellent question. And it's one in which the, you know, the CCP has not allowed to take a great deal of public prominence, of course they, they didn't, for example, report the deaths of PLA soldiers until months later, and so it's been one that's been deliberately, I think, kept out of the public view, very much in contrast to the way it played out in the Indian media. And so I think of course, because it pertains to territorial sovereignty, it has to, it is somewhat central, but on the other hand, relative to, you know, issues like, Taiwan or Hong Kong, Xinjiang, I would say that it is lower in centrality than some of those top line, top level ones.

- Tom Gold asks, he says, "Great job. What do you see as China's policy toward threats to boycott the Olympics? Might they change policy as in 2008 due to foreign threats even if they don't admit that that's what they're doing?"

- Another great question, Tom, nice to see you. So, you know, in 2008, of course, the changes in Chinese policy, China was very different. Of course there's a different, you know, a much lower level of development, just less influential on the global stage. You know, some

of the changes that I think were documented as a result of international pressure had to do with China's stance on Darfur. So these are, you know, atrocities that are taking place outside of China's borders, as opposed to, you know, a campaign inside China's borders. Of course, although there were similar concerns in Tibet. Ultimately I don't think that even the threat of a boycott would be sufficient, you know, to really force a reversal of the policies that have been taking place on the atrocities taking place in Xinjiang. And, but perhaps, you know there could be a moderation, you know, again I think I defer to those on the, who study this issue more closely to determine whether or not China's, like the move of those detained in the internment camps to forced labor programs, whether or not, or, you know, programs that amount of forced labor, whether or not that amounts to an improvement of the kind that you know, one was hoping to see. Ultimately I think what the outsiders would like to see would be a return to some of the policies that predated the rapid construction and internment of you know, millions of leaders and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Getting to that outcome, I'm not sure that, you know, even a concerted campaign to boycott the Beijing Olympics would have the intended effect.

- Thank you. I need to put two questions together. Suzanne Hamner asks, "Could you give examples of China's territorial compromises?" I would add to that, what's the explanation for the dramatically different handling of its earlier land border issues, where it compromised all the issues it could compromise, and the maritime issues where it's been, been very forceful. Nick Drake says if he would, well, I'll put that together with Kella Slung's question. Do you see the centrality of issues changing over time? Here's an example of dramatic change over time, the territorial issues. Nick Drake says that he would like to come in live about the question of territorial compromises. Nick, you want to speak up?

- [Nick] Sorry Bill, I was just marking that so that we can move it into the answered questions. Cause then everybody can see what the question is.

- Oh, okay. Oh, so everybody knows what the question is now. I put together kind of a complicated question.

- Okay, terrific. So, you know, in terms of the territorial compromise, the question that Suzanne asked, you know, again, this is, sort of China has along its borders, more than it doesn't, you know, neighbors by land. And this is if I refer you to the seminal work of Taylor Fravel here, you know, but with Russia, with, even with India, Afghanistan, you know, all along China's borders, there have been detectable compromises, but they did cluster at particular points in time, times, you know, in the 1960s, and then in the early 1990s, times when, you know, again, China was facing a very different domestic and international environment. And I would say that it's, at

the time, and this is again very much borrowing from Taylor Fravel's work, saw across the border a counterpart that could help seal the border and resolve some of these concerns about security in, you know, China's hinterland. By contrast I think today, if anything, you know, the Chinese government sees international actors as being part and parcel of the problem, is concerned about foreign fighters, is concerned about international support for what it sees as threats to national unity and separatism. And so these are not cases in which I think, and this is now departing from Fravel's framework, and these are not, I think, great candidates for the Chinese government to see, you know, cooperation as necessarily bringing about the kinds of domestic benefits that the CCP saw in these earlier phases of territorial compromise. And then in addition, you know, China's really resolved, I would say probably the easiest border disputes and what's remain, what remains are the harder ones. Bill, you asked about the shifting centrality of issues over time. I recently had the pleasure of hosting researcher Andrea Ghiselli, who's talking about the, sort of China's, you know, increasing global footprint and protecting its security interests overseas. And for a long time he suggests that the PLA was actually reluctant to defend, intervene in these far flung lands where, you know, a few Chinese civilians or interests might have been threatened or in some cases killed. Seeing these as detracting from the core interests of the core mission of the People's Liberation Army. But increasingly, you know, particularly after Libya and the kind of the evacuation of tens of thousands of Chinese, there's been a greater acceptance. And a willingness to embrace that and different way of thinking about Chinese security is in including some of these more far-flung interests. So that's an, I think an example of a way in which, even though, again, relatively speaking these are much less central than, you know, the sort of the longstanding concerns about territorial sovereignty, the issues across the Taiwan Strait. Nevertheless, you could see some issues even in, especially when they trigger broad public outcry, as elevating the centrality of some of these, you know, issues far from China's talking outside of the Asian region.

- Thanks. Will Young asks "When and how did the South China Sea islands become a core interest of China close to the importance of homeland issues? Will this policy definitely last or might it change in the future?" I'll just add to that, how would you recommend the US government respond to, for instance, the new initiatives in taking over islands that have been controlled, or rocks that have been controlled by the Philippines?

- Great, some good questions here. So the, you know, Michael Swain and others have documented, there was a big controversy over whether or not the South China Sea was in fact formally included in the term, you know, core interests in the early part of the Obama administration. Nevertheless, I think we have seen, and Andrew Chubb's research has also documented this, a growing assertiveness in terms of sending

patrols, fortifying and deploying capabilities in the South China Sea dating to about 2007. Some of the rhetoric, whether or not it exactly took place at the timing that was widely reported, nonetheless, the South China sea has been growing in importance, in particular, you know, first I think in strategic importance, not just, you know, for security reasons, but also the economic value, the resources there, et cetera. Nevertheless, I think that, and I don't mean, I honestly, I don't see that fading in importance, if anything, Chubb's research suggests that this has been much more a continual accumulation over time, not something that, you know, comes and goes. There's not a whole lot of dramatic swings in these policies; these reflect longterm investments. And so it's, you know, to your question, Noel, what should the United States do? You know, this is very, you know, there's no kind of one size fits all, but I do think that this research suggests that public admonishments, public patrols that seem to single out China and Chinese claims are, you know likely to be not particularly effective, if not counterproductive in stoking pressure on the Chinese government to mount ever more public celebrations of Chinese so-called rights protection activities in the South China Sea. A lot of this also depends, of course, it's not just about, it's not a bilateral dispute, you know, very much depends on what other US partners and allies in the area are willing to do. And so, you know, there's some combination of this, such as like, you know, I think the freedom of navigation patrols that, you know, contest, for example, Indian claims, are part of a strategy more broadly to enforce customary international law without necessarily singling out a particular country. But of course, any country that appears to be, you know, it's not just China that is taken aback by these freedom of navigation operations. So, you know, some combination of this sort of not singling out a particular nationality or nation and in doing so in a way that is relatively quiet and not broadcast, you know, for public audiences, not embedding, you know, for example, media personnel on the planes that are conducting these patrols, you know, all of that is, could be helpful in having the desired effect without the public backlash.

- Thank you. Kate Cho from the University of Hawaii has a question that I guess is picking up on your emphasis on economic performance as one of the key pillars. She says "Xi Jinping does not seem to care about economic performance if it's damaged by the anti corruption campaign. How do you see the the regime perception of that trade off?"

- So within each of these central pillars, including growth, there's this focus on economic welfare. There's also been a shift over time in the kinds of growth that the CCP has emphasized. And so, you know, the campaign against corruption, the anti-corruption campaign I think has been part and parcel, well of course there are many different potential motives here, interests that are served by the campaign, but one of them is to, you know, combat the perception that growth has, you know, fattened the elite at the expense of, you know, less well

off in society. So the effort to make growth, to emphasize higher quality growth, more equitable growth, rather than high-speed growth at all costs, I think has been a, you know, a notable shift in dating, even predating that Xi Jinping regime. But nonetheless, or administration, but nonetheless, has accelerated certainly under his watch. So I would say that this is not about moving away from growth, but looking at the kind of growth that the CCP has been encouraging and used to, again, legitimate its domestic performance.

- And following up on that, Gopal Nodader, a Kennedy School student from India, asks "To what extent is China's aggressive approach in the South China Sea and South Asia due to a burgeoning military industrial complex as the key domestic audience? And what implications does your answer have for how US and other countries should respond?"

- This is an intriguing hypothesis, but I think one that has not been particularly well supported by who have looked more closely at this question, in particular the civil military repealing of party military relations in China have continued to privilege the party's interests over the military. Of course, every so often their military gets out ahead, particularly in terms of its economic investments, et cetera, but, you know, time and again we've seen the kind of party taking charge again, you know, reigning in the military or other organizational interests that appear to, you know for the party's, you know, overall interests, whether that's, and so, you know, while the military retains the ability to think about and propose alternatives, it seems to me, based on the research of many of my fellow scholars in this area, that the military is often kept on quite a short leash. And it is not a particularly compelling explanation for what we've seen.

- Thank you, Graham Alison says, "Great presentation." His question is "What is unique or special about China's party's choices and actions? If you compare it with the US or other governments who also have a hierarchy of interests and are more assertive in protecting their core interests, where does China differ significantly different from the US or other countries?"

- Thanks, Graham. This is great to see you, and thanks for the terrific question. So in principle I think the framework could be adapted to other countries. Of course, the defining kind of central pillars, the nature of the domestic interests that vie for influence are going to be a little bit different. And they may actually differ more frequently than they do in China, where there's, I think, a great deal more continuity even across Chinese administrations than there is, for example, in the United States, where we saw a huge shift in what, for example, the Trump administration prioritized to what the Biden administration has prioritized. And of course there are many areas of continuity there as well, particularly with regard to China. And so, you know, if you take this, for example, to the United States, we might say, oh, well actually there's a whole lot less contestation.

Although maybe I'm trying to insert a little bit more of that. There's less contestation over the issue of China than there is, you know, for example, on other issues, whether it, trade for example. And so trade is not something that, for example, the Biden administration has put front and center in the early days of its administration, preferring instead to look at some of these, you know, high centrality low contestation issues as areas to lead with in terms of moving forward with US policy. So that's, you know, but of course this is just the you know, potential beginning to exploring this, how far this framework can travel across space as well as over time. In principle, I don't think this is a framework. I mean, autocracy doesn't appear anywhere in the framework. It just is a matter of, okay, what are the mechanisms, you know, by which domestic interests exercise influence in an autocracy is going to look different, in some ways more than others, than that looks in a democracy like the United States.

- Excellent. Steven Wald from the Kennedy School asks "Is it all that reassuring that China isn't trying to export its system? During the cold war, for example, the US partnered with lots of non-democracies, including China, in order to contain and weaken the USSR. From a US perspective, an equally pragmatic Chinese approach might be more worrisome precisely because it is more likely to be more effective."

- Thanks, that's a terrific question. And I like the way you put that. I didn't, I don't mean it to be this, first of all this is sort of an analytic judgment. I think it's important from the perspective of policy to accurately diagnose what it is one's strategic competitor is doing. And so if one is going after or attempting to counter a strategy that isn't actually taking place, then one has missed the wall. But I very much agree with you that a much, China's pragmatism is actually, in its economic and its technical capabilities, actually represent the far more sort of influential portion of China's global outreach. And so if the United States, for example, and other countries want to compete with that, they'll have to do so, not on a sort of ideological grounds, but rather on the material basis of Chinese power.

- Lynette Long asks, "In the Xi Jinping era, to what extent are netizens and policy leads a constraining factor or a sieve in being ultimately able to dictate most policy directions?"

- Lynette, thanks for that excellent question, and good to see you. So, you know, here, I think that it is, of course this is engaging in a lot of speculation because I don't know, you know, inside of Xi Jinping's head, how much these fears weigh upon him, these potential threats, of course, and there's no easy way to, you know, address that definitively. But nonetheless, you know, I think that we look more generally at speeches in which he's talked about the growing risks, including speeches in which he's talked about the importance of public opinion as a matter of life or death for the Chinese communist party,

including managing the internet as the biggest variable. And so, you know, perhaps even more provocatively, we might suggest that a leader like Xi Jinping, who has, you know arrogated power faces an important question over whether he will get a third term next year. You know, that is the kind of leader who, if ousted, would face a far worse fate than say a democratically elected leader or a leader who was voted out of office. And of course there's no specific timetable, even though we might look at the Chinese political calendar and say, oh, we can see some key windows of potential vulnerability. Nonetheless, you know, the CCP leadership could be ousted at any moment, depending on what, you know, either a reshuffling inside and Xi Jinping himself, you know, the reshuffling inside the elite, let alone some kind of mass revolt in the streets. There isn't the kind of regular electoral calendar that dictates that. So, you know, again, this is not grounded in a lot of, you know, concrete example of, oh, well, here's when public opinion forced decision makers to recant. But nonetheless, when you look at, for example, the roll out of, you know, the belt and road initiative where you look at, you know, Ming Ye's work for example, on the pushback, particularly amongst the public, but also amongst elites, some kind of martial plan. You know, there's a lot of resistance to China spending, you know, great sums of money overseas when there are so many who are trying to make ends meet, et cetera at home. And so, you know, this domestic pushback does matter, but again, it's not as easy as you can see in a in a more transparent democratic system.

- Andrew Ruffin asked, "How do US-China relations fit into the structure you described? Does the communist party seek collaborative common relations with Washington as being in its interests, or is a significant level of tension more in line with the party's domestic agenda?"

- So here, I mean I think there is sort of a parallelism where the Chinese Congress party is first and foremost interested in its domestic survival. And it has its international interests defined largely by these domestic objectives. And US-China relations, you know, really reflects whether or not there can be, you know, where there's confrontation on these issues that are the CCP deems core to its domestic legitimacy. And when it meets with that kind of resistance, let alone pressure or sanctions, I think we are seeing the result of that, this domestic framework in action here. And so it's, you know, of course I think the CCP recognizes that it is still not number one, it still needs a relatively benign international environment in which to, you know, continue to grow domestically, continue to innovate, develop self-reliance in key industries and technologies. It's not ready to fight and win a war with the United States. So, you know, for many reasons, of course, the Chinese government would like to avoid all out confrontation, and you see that also in Chinese rhetoric. But I think that objective of positive relations if you will, you know, is still intentioned with, you know,

the kind of unyielding desire to, you know, reinforce Chinese resolve or bottom line on many of these issues that they deem core to their regime's survival.

- Steve Shenckel asks "How will China see the US withdrawal from Afghanistan this year? How will this impact their concerns over extremism spilling over into China or impacting the Uighurs?"

- That's a tough one. I mean, I think it will depend on what happens in, I think that, you know, as as Sheena Greitens and others have noted that, you know, China's concerns in Xinjiang are in part framed in terms of the concern about terrorism and the risk of the involvement of foreign fighters. And so it is going to be, I think, dicey, but nonetheless those who have been looking at this a little bit more closely I think indicate that, you know, China is likely to try to work multilaterally to try to resolve this issue rather than unilaterally to secure any sort of a post US future there.

- Unfortunately we've run out of time. I just want to thank you for a wonderful presentation. It's obviously attracted interest from some of the world's leading scholars, as well as the rest of us. And so thanks. And we look forward to having you back again.

- Thank you all. It's been a wonderful session. Really terrific questions. Thanks again.