



September 3, 2021

Featuring Emily de La Bruyère, Richard Goldberg, and Craig Singleton
Hosted by FDD Founder and President Clifford D. May

MAY: There are dozens of international organizations affiliated with the United Nations. Some do useful work. Those that do not are under no particular pressure to improve. As for those that do harm, they pretty much enjoy impunity. Republican and Democratic administrations alike have preferred to leave not well enough alone. FDD scholars recently published a monograph, *A Better Blueprint for International Organizations*, examining what has gone wrong and what could be done if there is the will to reform the flawed and deteriorating UN system, a system generously funded by American taxpayers.

MAY: With us today to talk about some of the organizations within the UN system are Emily de La Bruyère, a senior fellow at FDD who focuses on China; Craig Singleton, an adjunct fellow at FDD who spent more than a decade serving in a series of sensitive national security roles with the United States government overseas; and Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor at FDD who has served on the National Security Council, in both houses of Congress and who edited the FDD monograph. I'm Cliff May, and I'm pleased you're with us too, here on *Foreign Policy*.

MAY: Okay. Let's start with the WHO, in part because I want to say "who's on first?" Younger listeners don't get the reference and should Google "Abbott and Costello" and "baseball." Craig, what lessons should we draw about the World Health Organization and its response to the pandemic that emerged from China — I think we can conclusively say that — and which has plagued the world for more than a year now?

SINGLETON: Thanks, Cliff. I think if we're really assessing the WHO's mishandling of COVID, we really have to remember that COVID is occurring in the shadow of SARS. Back then, China engaged in an extensive coverup about SARS' origins.

MAY: Just tell people what SARS is. They may not know.

SINGLETON: SARS was the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome that plagued mostly southeast Asia in like the early 2000s. And so back then, once again, similar to now, you had sort of a Chinese coverup, and we only learned about the real details of SARS after a PLA physician actually leaked information about the virus to an Australian journalist. Right after then, the former WHO director general issued a really strong statement in which she called out China's leaders for withholding information about SARS. And it wasn't until that very moment, after those remarks, that China's leaders agreed to provide accurate information about SARS caseloads inside of China.

SINGLETON: Of course, the WHO's handling of COVID-19 has been very different. The Chinese government has shown no sign of willingly participating in the WHO's investigation into COVID's origins. And it has gone so far right to amplify disinformation about the virus. And so I think as we look specifically at the WHO over the last year and a half or so, the WHO's actions reaffirm the notion that this particular international organization really lacks the power to investigate and act swiftly when it's confronted with a potential virus outbreak.

SINGLETON: And so these and other authorities are not actually listed anywhere in the WHO's constitution. They're not listed anywhere in the 2005 International Health Regulations, or the IHR, which is like the global treaty that all WHO member states, including China, have ratified. And then WHO also doesn't have a formal dispute settlement mechanism like a lot of other international organizations. And so you can guess that China's taken pretty full advantage of those institutional weaknesses to protect its interests, particularly as they relate to global health standards. And I would say, in fact, we're starting to see China — and, to a lesser extent, Russia — working together right now to undermine EU-led efforts to strengthen the WHO's enforcement mechanisms, and that includes new measures aimed at



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combating pandemic disinformation. And so far, unfortunately, the United States government has been pretty silent on both of those issues.

MAY: Well, just so I'm clear, you say it doesn't have the power, but is it the matter of power or is it a matter of will? I mean, if China says to the WHO, "we really don't want you meddling or asking us inconvenient questions on this," do they say, "Okay, sorry about that. We'll back off?" And why wasn't -- after the SARS epidemic, as you pointed out, China was not forthcoming, not cooperative, it demonstrated there was a problem. Why didn't the US, why didn't its European allies, why didn't they make an effort at reform then? It sounds like they kind of shrugged it off and said, "Well, I hope it doesn't happen again." But, of course, it did — and much worse.

SINGLETON: So, the International Health Regulations was actually negotiated right after SARS. There was a wake-up call sort of in the international community. However, you know that when we're negotiating these sorts of very complicated agreements that can sort of drag on a little bit, certain measures get watered down and any attempt back then to sort of insert something about a really strong enforcement mechanism was removed. And really there was a groundswell of support and dictatorships around the world at the time to say, "We're not going to allow you to have, for example, parts of the treaty that say that you can enter into my country without my knowledge or consent, or that you can publish our data without our knowledge or consent." And so you really started to see, I think, this bifurcation in the global system between democracies who were interested in sort of strengthening those protocols and these authoritarian regimes that very clearly said, "There's no way we're going to open the door to the international community."

SINGLETON: And remember, this is happening within the context several years after the Iraq invasion, things that were happening in the international community at a time when we were talking about authoritarian concerns about sovereignty. And in that case, they happened to win the day. And it might be because China, back in 2004, actually did comply with the World Health Organization. There was a sense that, okay, they would understand that if they refused to do so, there would be a negative consequence. And it's just a very different China that we're dealing with today.

MAY: I'm going to ask you one more question, then Rich, I want to see if you either have a comment or a question for Craig on this. But a quick who's who at the WHO. In particular, who is WHO Director General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and what is his relationship with China's rulers?

SINGLETON: Yeah. So Tedros has never actually practiced as a medical doctor. So he's a career politician who was born in what is now Eritrea. He began work under the communist Derg junta at the time. He later went to study in the UK, and then he rose to the top of Ethiopia's government first as a health minister and then as foreign minister, before he was elected to lead the WHO in 2017. Shortly after his election to lead the WHO, it was alleged that Chinese diplomats had been heavily involved in lobbying on his behalf. And if you go back and look through UN records, they also show that Chinese contributions to both Ethiopia's aid budget and the WHO substantially increased during times when Tedros was in top leadership positions.

SINGLETON: So, all told, there are always been some worrying indications about Tedros' objectivity when it comes to China. And then you also have to take into account his very strong public praise of Beijing's initial handling of COVID-19, which really went beyond the pale and sort of directly contradicted what WHO officials knew at the time behind the scenes about the outbreak and China's refusal to cooperate. So, it is an alliance that goes back many years and will likely continue for years in the future, so long as Tedros doesn't take any steps that really undermine Beijing's long-term objectives.



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GOLDBERG: Cliff, there's good news and bad news. The good news is he was elected in 2017 to a five-year term, and that term is coming to a close. And there's an opportunity to try to now elect new leadership. And this is the moment. This is the crisis moment to do exactly that. The bad news is that the United States at this point has not given any indication that they're going to back an alternative candidate. In fact, Dr. Tedros has announced he is running for reelection. In the middle of COVID – it is beyond in a normal sort of cognizance to think about that. But, yes, he is running for reelection to be director general of the WHO. And without a concerted diplomatic effort by the United States and our allies, he'll get it.

SINGLETON: Yep. And what's really weird about the WHO, Rich, is that even though his term doesn't end until next May, the opportunity, the window, to nominate a new candidate, the door closes on September 15th, I think. So almost nine months before he would actually win. So if the US doesn't submit a new candidate or support a candidate or a challenger by another country in the next month, game over, Tedros is a shoo-in for reelection.

MAY: I mean, this is not malpractice, this is non-practice. I recently had a conversation with somebody, I won't mention the name, somebody you probably know, and they were very critical of the Trump administration for having pulled out of the WHO and for having pulled its money. And I said, I see your point. You don't have a seat at the table. You can't have an influence. On the other hand, engagement surely is not enough. Why didn't the Biden administration use the leverage it had by saying, "Okay, we'll come back in, we'll start the money flowing again. But don't you think there's a few reforms that should begin at this point? And we'd like to see those announced before we rejoin and certainly before the money begins to flow." And to my kind of astonishment, my interlocutor didn't seem to see the logic of that.

SINGLETON: Strange. I mean, it is really fascinating because you're right. We saw no real movement. I think a lot of people were confused to say, this is your moment of leverage. We are certainly exercising leverage on China, for example, with tariffs right now, maintaining Trump era tariffs. So the administration understands the role of leverage and the role of using money and checkbook diplomacy on other countries. This one is a real head scratcher though.

MAY: And just so people understand that what we're talking about in terms of money, the US contributes currently I think nearly 400 million bucks a year to the WHO.

SINGLETON: Yep.

MAY: Compared to just 85 million or so from China. And, by the way, you would think that would give more clout to the US at the organization. You'd think it's just, "Well, this is my biggest funder. I've got to be receptive." But evidently that was not the case.

SINGLETON: Yeah, that's right. And of the 400 million, 300 of it is entirely voluntary. So about a hundred million dollars we owe according to the rules and regulations that sort of mandate what we give to the United Nations. But 300 million a year is entirely voluntary. And one of the things that's never really been done by any WHO member state is to leverage those financial contributions to promote top to bottom reform. The United States can actually earmark all \$300 million of those funds for specific programs to exercise control over the WHO's scope of work. We're talking about 20% of the WHO's budget. And we are sort of uniquely positioned to do so.

SINGLETON: So, for example, you could withhold money until Taiwan's observer status is reinstated at the WHO. It's something that Tedros could do. You could hold it off until the WHO updates its sexual assault reporting guidelines.



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Because last year and earlier this year, there were a series of alarming reports about rampant sexual abuse throughout the WHO's senior-most ranks. Why don't we devote money and hold money for things like that? You could hold earmark funds, for example, to have an independent audit of the WHO's finances and its governance. These are all just starter ideas. And if we were to communicate with partners and allies to do it, we could really increase the likelihood of change.

GOLDBERG: And I would just say, Craig, I think the Taiwan idea is the one that really has most merit, directly hitting Beijing on an issue they care a lot about, something where you have bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, for sure. Oh, and by the way, Taiwan, one of the leaders during COVID in the response, the idea of isolating Taiwan and not allowing them at least observer status (the WHO) is antithetical to the mission of the agency. So that's a no brainer that this administration should be pushing on very hard.

SINGLETON: And they had observer status in the past. This isn't some novel concept. When the former Taiwanese government got along with Beijing, China had no problems with them being there. The second there was a switch and there was a more confrontational relationship, you see China weaponizing the UN. And that's just not the way it's supposed to be.

MAY: Emily. I'm going to bring you in just to elaborate a little bit on Taiwan's relationship with the WHO. And also its performance in regard to the pandemic, because, as I understand it, it was exceptional. I mean, some people know that. A lot of people may not recognize that because it hasn't been highly publicized.

BRUYÈRE: I mean, I think this, tactically — but then also more broadly — is one of the great tragedies of Taiwan's place or lack of place in the global system. Taiwan is an exemplary state in terms of performance during COVID, which it aced, but also more broadly as a robust democracy with a robust civil society, despite being under siege for pretty much its entire existence. And, I mean, there is so much the rest of the world could have learned from Taiwan during COVID. There is so much the rest of the world can learn from Taiwan in general. And -- but because of Chinese pressure, we can't learn that. There isn't a spot for that. There's no spot for Taiwan in the international organizations, including the WHO, and Taiwan just doesn't have a voice on the world stage. And it's a real failure, I think, of American support for the island that we haven't gone out of our way to do that. And that our bolstering of Taiwan so much orients around arm sales and not around giving Taiwan a place.

MAY: Talk Craig, also — and Rich may want to come in on this — the WHO's performance in Syria, which has undergone such a terrible suffering under Bashar al-Assad, who has probably killed half a million of his people and made another maybe 5 million homeless, either as internally displaced or as refugees. Now it's a health emergency and catastrophe by any standard. So, what has the WHO done or not done in Syria?

SINGLETON: Syria I think as we would all say is pretty devastating all around, and one of the key challenges for the WHO in Syria, and we should mention, by the way, that Syria was just elected to the WHO's executive board, which is its highest decision-making body. This is a country that the WHO itself acknowledged publicly just last year, obviously had gassed its own people and used chemical and biological weapons on its own people and yet they were elected to the executive board. I think that gives you a sense about some of the governance problems at the WHO. But in Syria specifically, all aid must flow through the Assad government. So all medical aid that the WHO wants to provide to ravaged areas, whether it's vaccines, whether it's just basic medical supplies, all roads go through Damascus.

SINGLETON: And what we started to really document and witness is, number one, we see medical supplies from the WHO flowing into Assad-backed families, Assad-backed companies. They're siphoning off supplies for the Syrian



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army and there's no real way to monitor or track what supplies are actually making it to the front where the people need it most. And, once again, to the WHO, it's sort of a governance problem. It's not like they can do air lifts and drops into these zones. They are trying to work within a very, very flawed system that I don't think anyone has figured out, and the United States has its own challenges there. But it is devastating to see that — despite their best intentions — they have, unfortunately, fallen into this Syria trap.

MAY: Okay. So we've got the WHO cow-towing to China's rulers and bending over backwards for the dictator in Syria, who has mass murdered his people and used chemical weapons against them. Rich, how is the WHO's relations with Israel?

GOLDBERG: Well, if you put aside the fact that, at their annual assembly, they take a moment to pause the discussion of a global pandemic of truly historic proportions to have a moment to have a resolution to condemn the state of Israel — and only the state of Israel — then I think it's going well. I think it's going well. Listen, we talk about the systemic anti-Israel nature, antisemitism that exists throughout the UN system. This is a great example. There's no reason for the WHO to have an obsession with the state of Israel, to have a resolution in the middle of its assembly to discuss the issue. And, frankly, this should be on the reform agenda, not just for the WHO, but writ large throughout these agencies where this sort of movement has taken hold.

MAY: All right, let's move on to the UN Human Rights Council, the UNHRC. I don't think I exaggerate when I say that the UN Human Rights Council has become a club for the world's worst human rights violators, including China, Cuba, Russia and Venezuela, all members. Just talk a little bit about what's going on at the human rights council and where, Craig, there's been no reform or even talk of reform, as far as I'm aware.

SINGLETON: Yeah, no, countries like China have used UNHRC to advance a culture of impunity for repressive regimes. The case of China provides a pretty grim example. I think of the UNHRC's failures, thanks to very, very deft coalition building with other serial abusers as well as economic and political coercion against potential detractors. Beijing has stymied efforts to be held accountable for its grave human rights violations, and these include obviously the detention of more than a million Uyghurs in modern day concentration camps, violent crackdowns on pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and in Tibet, and obviously the suppression of information at the outset of COVID-19. And I think in 2020, China warned UN delegations that statements questioning its human rights record could have economic and political consequences. Beijing has worked with countries like you said — Pakistan and Russia, Syria, Venezuela — to issue statements in support of its crackdowns in Hong Kong and against Uyghurs. And many of the African nations that have joined in these statements were in the process of negotiating debt repayments with China at the time.

SINGLETON: China has also really managed to burrow very deeply into the organization to protect its interests and those of its allies. So, for example, last year, the UNHRC's Asian group appointed China to the organization's -- it's called the consultative group. And this group, it consists of five ambassadors and it facilitates the appointment of human rights experts on issues like freedom of speech and religion, housing, public health. It also appoints individuals to monitor human rights conditions in countries like Cambodia, Iran, Burma, North Korea, all of which maintain really close diplomatic relations with Beijing. So I think what they've managed to really do is really set the agenda, but burrow in really deeply into the bureaucracy to really have major, major, influence over key decisions at a tactical level.

MAY: And Rich, in the Trump administration, ambassador Nikki Haley, our Ambassador to the UN, and I think Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, I think they saw pretty clearly not only that the UN Human Rights Council was really a parody of what it was supposed to be — an Orwellian organization if there was one — but also that there was no way to



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fix it, so they pulled out. And the Biden administration has rejoined, again, without demanding any changes, any reform whatsoever. They would argue, yeah, we'll engage, and, once we engage, we can improve things — but there's no history that that's ever the case. But I'm curious, our European allies, how do they simply overlook what the UN Human Rights Council is and will continue to be?

GOLDBERG: I think that's a fundamental question and it remains an opportunity for the Biden administration, if they ever wanted to seize it. It was an opportunity, perhaps, for the Trump administration. I just think it was a bad messenger with all the broken China already and some of the bilateral relationships with other issues. But you're right. If you're a democracy and you are trapped inside this rigged system where you cannot get the vote to condemn actual human rights violations, you cannot launch investigations that you want to, that you are enabling investigations of democracies rather than investigations of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. The question would then be why are you continuing in this process? And I think their answer is, well, there's no other process, this is it. So if we're not here, then they're just here and we need to speak up. And yes, we don't win these votes so to speak, but we get to have votes and our votes are counted and there are numbers and we get to make speeches.

GOLDBERG: And it's not like we get things done in the Security Council because Russia and China veto, but we still hold meetings. And it's important to hold the meetings and have the discussions. And yes, it's true, our adversaries get to use the same tactics against us and they get to elevate themselves into positions of leadership and claim they are human rights leaders because they sit on the Human Rights Council, but it's still worth it. I think if you presented an alternative to fellow democracies, I've always thought, in political terms, it's hard to fight something with nothing. I think you have to always present a credible alternative and say, this could work. This could be an alternative mechanism outside of the UN where you would have democracies only by certain independent records — Freedom House or wherever you want to use — to be a free nation. And that free nations can come together and have discussions, but the club can't include those countries that aren't free, because, by definition, it makes no sense for them to participate.

MAY: Let me just throw this at you. We've never actually discussed this. I'm curious, Craig or Emily, if you have thoughts on it too. What if it were even broader than that? What if you were even more generous. You don't have to be a full democracy in order to join this new club outside of the UN. You just have to recognize some fundamental human rights. You decide there are 10 of them that you want, and if you're guaranteeing those human rights to your citizens, you can come in even if you're not a full democracy, with the idea that you're working towards more democracy over time. It would be a larger organization, a more inclusive organization. It wouldn't just be a club for the United States essentially and the Europeans and maybe Israel and Japan, but you could have third world nations in it and you would say, again, there are just these basic freedoms. Freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, whatever it is. What do you think about that, Rich?

GOLDBERG: I think the one potential trap there is that you have a lot of regimes that will claim, I'm for that. North Korea has a wonderful constitution, as they say. I think it was one of our Supreme Court justices who said, "The constitution itself is not the reason why we have rule of law and respect for basic freedoms. It is the institutions that implement and protect those and safeguards those freedoms." I think it was Justice Gorsuch, gave a long interview recently. It is possible, right? You could have somebody say, are you upholding the universal declaration of human rights? That was the paper post World War II as the UN had been founded, that we were trying to bring people around certain principles to ensure that the promise of never again was never again.

GOLDBERG: But again, you have a problem where, how do we enforce whether or not a country is upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? A country like Iran, China, they're clearly in deep breach of the declaration. So I



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take your point. We shouldn't just say this is the kind of government that can be in these conversations, but I think that a free society is the characterization I would make, perhaps not democracy or Republican democracy or parliamentary or constitutional monarchy, that the style of how they are governed matters less and the results of the freedom of their people matters more.

MAY: I think we're kind of agreeing but I push back just on this. The UN Declaration of Human Rights has always struck me as a grab bag, or everything is in it, rights that we don't guarantee are in it, socialist rights are rented. It's way beyond. I'm talking about, you have a small number of nations that are free nations, and then again, they establish a half dozen of the rights in the bill of rights. Again, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, maybe one or two others. And you say, okay, this nation has that at least so they can be part of this club and now it's a realistic club. And part of what it does is to highlight the worst human rights abuses that the UN Human Rights Council refuses to highlight and bring some pressure upon them in whatever ways are possible, and not least through economic pressure, which we'll talk about when we get to the World Trade Organization.

GOLDBERG: It's an interesting concept, and by the way, I love this conversation. And for those listening, we're happy to have you talk in person how we actually implement this policy basis. I think if you look at what Secretary Mike Pompeo did with his commission on inalienable rights, what you just said really triggered that in my mind. I think it was unfortunately politicized because of the political environment in which it was released. But people on both sides of the aisle, different ideologies, I think if you read the actual work that was done, the research, perhaps some of those principles are in there, that you could bring together nations upon where we have those shared values, we have those shared principles.

GOLDBERG: And it is not impossible to do some sort of an ad hoc group that gains credibility. That's how you form an international organization. We're doing this in some ways. It started under the Trump administration. The Biden administration is continuing it with countries that want to be China tech free, and we'll talk about that in a little bit. You can do that with other countries that have an interest in meeting informally, calling it something, and over time, the meeting itself, the fact that you have a-

GOLDBERG: And over time, the meeting itself, the fact that you have a consultative body, the fact that you have decisions and discussions. Maybe you meet annually, maybe you meet more than that, less than that. Over time, that becomes an actual organization with credibility.

MAY: All right. Let's move on to the International Telecommunications Union, the ITU. Emily, I'm sure many people will think, oh, telecommunications. Well, that's a topic for technocrats, no geopolitical significance there. But those who think that, you'd say they're wrong, wouldn't you?

BRUYÈRE: I probably would say they're wrong. It's amazing how also, though, that seems to be the consensus. These organizations that no one was paying attention to, probably just a matter of years ago, are now, at least in our little echo chambers, hot button topics. And I think it is worth stressing that telecommunications is in the name of the ITU, but its mandate is broader than that. And it covers pretty much everything that's related to information and communication.

MAY: Well, just talk a little bit. What is it? Why does the ITU matter?



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BRUYÈRE: So, again, it covers everything. It's a UN specialized agency, covers everything related to information and communication, and standards for them, as well as development, and generally how information technology and communication technology are going to evolve globally and become interoperable. Needless to say, IT and communications have been important since they became things, but they're getting more important year by year and pretty rapidly. We're on our way to a connected world. We're already in a connected world. That's only going to accelerate. So, these underlying technologies are going to be the foundational architecture of the international system. To an extent, they already are. The internet's a great example. So are satellites. And that's only going to become more the case. So, all of the areas over which the ITU has oversight, or in which it's recommending standards, these are going to be the things that determine how commerce, society, information transiting, even security and government evolve moving forward.

MAY: So, a little more who's who. Houlin Zhao, a Chinese national, as I understand it, is in the middle of his second four-year term as the ITU Secretary General. Would you call him a devoted international civil servant?

BRUYÈRE: I would call him the leader of a very important specialized agency who is responsive to the Chinese Communist Party. Not throwing shade at Zhao himself, but rather because that is, by definition, the existence of any international civil servant who is affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party.

MAY: Yeah. I may expand upon that, Rich, a little bit, because you know, there were elections for these jobs to be the heads of these agencies and people from all over the world get these jobs. When an American gets one of these jobs, I think they usually consider themselves, okay, I am an international civil servant. I have global responsibilities. I've got to think about what's best for the international community. I certainly do not expect to take orders from Washington DC, but I surmise that when Chinese nationals get these jobs, they have a very different view of their responsibilities and with which authority they report.

GOLDBERG: No, that's absolutely true. As Emily said, we know and expect that Chinese nationals that get positions of leadership in the UN system are reporting back to the CCP, are there to advance CCP interests. I think if I was the Director General with senior staff under me that were Chinese officials, I would be concerned about confidentiality and what information Beijing is able to glean. But certainly, if you're in the leadership post, the top post, if you are the Director General, the Secretary General, this is clearly now advancing Beijing's interest, and we see them do it. It's not a theoretical case of, oh, is Zhao really advancing China's interest at ITU, or it just happens to be that China comes up a lot? No, he's advocating, he's using ITU as a platform to sell Huawei to the world. And it's documented.

GOLDBERG: In the midst of all of our security concerns that we're trying to share with our allies to decouple their infrastructure, their technology infrastructure from Huawei, he's using the ITU to try to promote standards and actually have business, private sector type interactions for people to meet Huawei and to spread that. Other organizations they lead, like the UN industrial development organization, UNIDO, I mean, literally hosting conferences for the belt and road initiative, for the BRI initiative. It is basically the BRI UN agency.

GOLDBERG: So, clearly a lot of issues there, but we need to be understanding that the people in the leadership posts get the most news coverage, but it's not just the top individuals. It's the deputies. It's the Assistant Secretary General, the Assistant Director of Generals in very key posts that could have an interest.

MAY: Emily, there's two points there that I want you to elaborate on because people may not understand. One is Huawei. Easy to think, depending on what you're reading now, Huawei. Well, it's this very good, cutting edge Chinese company, and sure, American and European companies that aren't as good want to keep it out of the market, but if they're



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the best, we compete and they win and that's fine. And what's wrong with that, after all? And the other thing is even the Belt and Road Initiative. We see plenty of reports, depending on what you read, the open road initiative is the People's Republic of China trying to make sure that it's good transportation and communication and trade among nations. They're helping infrastructure projects around the world. This is essentially foreign aid. Why are the Americans against foreign aid for all these countries that need ports and railroads and other ways to interact with international?

BRUYÈRE: If you'll forgive me, I think it makes sense at this point to just quickly take a step back and say, what is it that China's trying to achieve at an international level? And the short of it is that Beijing strategy hinges on shaping and controlling the international architecture. Beijing has diagnosed that, I hate using this phrase because it sounds so jargon-y or trite, but in a globalized world, what matters for countries and for power is not having the superior tool, not necessarily just having the superior tools of conflict. It's not about having the most powerful missiles. What you want to do is to control global exchange because that's the dominant form of interaction, whether state interaction or commercial interaction, in our system. And the way to control global exchange is to control the networks and the platforms of that exchange, whether that's literally the railroads on which goods move or that's the telecommunication systems that are defining, or IT systems or logistics systems that are defining how information transit and to where and observed by whom.

BRUYÈRE: So, this is Beijing's overall vision, and they stress all forms of architecture, but in particular, they target the ones we already spoke about in the context of the ITU, which are information and communication technology systems. Because the very short line on here is consistently from Chinese sources, is whoever controls information controls the world. And so, all of these different elements that you mentioned, Belt and Road, but also Huawei, fit into this larger vision. Belt and Road is, it's an effort to export in Chinese systems and companies and production all over the world, and also to bring other countries under China's influence. So, you can establish this web of networks and platforms.

BRUYÈRE: And then Huawei is one of many, but a significant one of many Chinese actors in this effort. Yes, it's a telecommunications company. It's also government backed, Chinese military tied, and more broadly responsive to the Chinese government and to the Chinese government's international strategy. And it's responsive in terms of sharing information, but also how it deploys and what it seeks to achieve in terms of building tomorrow's global system. So, that's the problem right there.

MAY: And if I'm oversimplifying, you'll tell me, but is it wrong to say that if Huawei is dominant in telecommunications, it's a little like in, I don't know, 1910, every letter you mail goes to a post office in Beijing and the postmaster there can read it?

BRUYÈRE: So, that's a really core part of it and that's the first level. The thing is that because we're not in 1910 anymore, it's bigger than that, too. Not only can Beijing read potentially all the information transiting everywhere, China can also shape the information that you receive. So, for example, if we're entering a connected 5G internet of things world, where our cars and mapping systems are also connected to the telecommunications network, when you get in the car and go to drive somewhere, it's going to take a certain route. If you have a Chinese controlled information architecture, Chinese government controlled information architecture, Chinese government can shape what route you take. The same applies for what headlines come up first when you search something or what e-commerce options or what internet provider might seem like the best internet provider. So, it's not only a superior ability of Beijing to access information. It's also disseminating information, which means controlling the virtual world. And in addition to that, because now the virtual world controls the physical world, the physical world.

MAY: Fascinating, absolutely. And distressing, by the way. All right, let's turn to the World Trade Organization, Craig. With a great deal of fanfare and with strong US backing in the Clinton administration, I should mention, China



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joined the World Trade Organization in 1999. This was the tail end of the Clinton administration. Maybe remind people what U.S.-China economic relations look like around this time and the years following.

SINGLETON: Yeah. So, China's entry into the WTO was met with some healthy doses of, I think, optimism and skepticism. It's important to remember that at the start of his administration, former President George W. Bush actually called China a strategic competitor. He did not call them a strategic partner, which was the language that had been used by the preceding Clinton administration. At the same time, this was in 2000, Congress established the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which is there to monitor and investigate and to submit to Congress an annual report on the national security implications of China America trade and to focus on Chinese proliferation practices and restrictions on free speech. This is also the time when Congress set up an executive commission on human rights to specifically monitor human rights and rule of law in China.

SINGLETON: But then 9/11 happened and a lot of Chinese grand strategists are said to have breathed sort of sighs of relief on September 12th, 2001. Relations between the United States and the PRC had been really heading sort of downhill in the months and years leading up to 9/11. And with 9/11, China realized that our Washington strategic focus would be shifting 3000 miles west, away from East Asia and Taiwan and into the mountains and deserts of Afghanistan. And China took full advantage of that moment to advance its economic ambitions, to strengthen its military and to secure Beijing support for a number of counterterrorism related measures. China was able to extract from Washington a number of things. They got the Bush administration, for example, to dial back criticism of human rights policies and China's intellectual property theft, among other things.

SINGLETON: And so, all around this time, China's expanding its military capabilities. It's doing so because it is a booming economy, courtesy of its WTO entry. And all of this really emboldens PRC national security decision makers. PRC diplomats start going around the world, Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, on what has been called a charm offensive, seeking to assure counterparts of China's "peaceful rise." And by and large, by 2007, you look at public opinion surveys in Asia and they said Beijing was a lot more trusted to wield global power than Washington. And so, you really do start to see the link there leading into the great recession in the United States, where China takes its WTO entry, its booming economy, invest in its military. And that's where you see this massive expansion in sort of China's national power and growth.

MAY: And back at the end of the 20th century, China was considerably poorer than it is today. But the WTO is part of the reason that China became wealthier over time. It was brought in, I believe, as a developing nation, which gave it specific privileges. It's retained that status today when it's the number two economy in the world. Emily, you might want to weigh in on that.

BRUYÈRE: Yeah. It's a remarkable irony. China gets to benefit really from both sides. One of the other things just to note is that Chinese strategy changed dramatically in 2001 upon entry to the World Trade Organization. Effectively, the idea was we reach this perch which increases our influence and increases our ability to access international resources. And so, now we can move on to next phase of our international strategy. So, for example, upon entry to the World Trade Organization, that's when China's international standardization strategy first becomes formulated, which is a huge deal, and that's really replicated all across different elements of what we're now piecing together as Beijing's larger global ambition.



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MAY: Emily, what would it take to say, "Okay, China. Congratulations. You were a developing country. You're now a developed country, so you're not going to have the status of a developing country and the privileges of that. Here's a gold watch and a handshake, and now you're in the big boys club."

BRUYÈRE: The issue is that that would take having a coalition of other international partners taking that stance alongside the US, and that might be a heavy lift. It seems like that's a heavy lift. To my mind, there's another thing, or there's something that the US can do first which might get balls related to Beijing's presence in the World Trade Organization rolling, which is revoking permanent normal trade relations status. Which is something that that's a US label, according to China. The US legislature can do that. China—

MAY: US legislation could do that.

BRUYÈRE: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

MAY: Let me just explain this and let you know. I'll let you go on. Just so people understand, permanent normal trade relations, PNTR. That is the status that used to be called, again, you'll correct me if I'm wrong, Emily and Craig, used to be called most favored nation status. It means as open a trade relationship, as with Britain or the EU, we have with any country that has PNTR. China has it now. It would seem to me that given China's long-time record of massive intellectual property theft—We're talking about hundreds of billions of dollars annually, hacking, counterfeiting, and what they did during this pandemic where they have, among other things, they were putting out protective materials, but selling them.

MAY: There's all kinds of reasons to say we should be, and we were reliant on various supply chains from China, which we now, I think, know that's not a strategically good idea. I understand you can't cut relations, economic relations with China overnight, but you can begin to disengage. You start with the strategic lines that you cannot depend on China for, but maybe you go to most favored nation status too, and you have trade relations, but it's not the same as with Britain or the EU.

BRUYÈRE: And that also sends a signal to Britain and the EU and the US private sector that Washington is serious about holding China accountable for breaking all of its commitments.

MAY: There's one other point there, and again, if I remember correctly, the idea of giving PNTR to China or to any nation, it's a suggestion that their workers are being treated reasonably well. Reasonably well, according to, what do we say, our international standards. Well, we know that's not the case, most obviously with the Uighurs. And if they're mistreating their workers, again, it doesn't have to be the standards of the most prosperous unions in the U.S., but the worst standards, then you really don't want them to have most favored nation status, which is PNTR status in the current vernacular. All right. I don't know. Craig, maybe you want to join in on this and have some thoughts.

SINGLETON: Well, now that you all have been Debbie Downers, I'm going to try to shift a little, just because if we fast forward to today, there's actually remarkably strong international consensus about the need to fix the WTO, primarily in response to the unique challenges posed by China's distinctive economic structure, its predatory economic practices, the non-market practices. And to your point about developing status, even the new WTO Director General, early in her tenure came out and said, more or less, I'm paraphrasing, "This is crazy. We can't have a scenario like this." I should mention, India also has developing nation status, so you have these massive economies. Even our friends who can take advantage of these systems, we need to have a little bit more of a fair playing ground, or a level playing field, rather.



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SINGLETON: And so, I think as the WTO is starting to look at China, the Europeans in particular, we have a lot of alignment with them. We're starting to kind of come up with a list of stuff that we want to take on. Beijing's use of industrial subsidies, forced technology transfer, all of that runs very counter to WTO rules and norms that Chinese obviously employ, other mercantilist trade practices like high tariffs and domestic content requirements, and those are all designed to illegally discriminate against foreign products and foreign producers.

SINGLETON: The challenge when you talk about the WTO is that there are so many gaps in the rules that the current structure remains really ill-equipped to respond to so many of these Chinese provocations that are so unique to its economy. And so it's sort of a good news, bad news scenario. These things are out there in the open. People are talking about them very regularly. We're starting to see that international coalition emerging to sort of challenge the WTO on this front. Because the WTO, all of these rules were negotiated decades ago, and the WTO leadership, for as weak as the Director General happens to be institutionally, they really do seem to understand that if they don't fix these things, the WTO can sort of fade into irrelevance here in the coming years.

MAY: As a sort of extra question, let me ask you for whatever final thoughts you have, but particularly, what in general can be done? It seems to me, nothing can be done by the U.S. alone, but it's also true that nothing can be done without U.S. leadership and the U.S. pushing its allies to do something, because they're not particularly inclined to move. And by contrast, the People's Republic of China and other adversaries, they take every opportunity they can to aggrandize their own position and diminish the U.S. and its allies. And we sort of say, "Well, this is unacceptable," but then, of course, we go on to accept it.

SINGLETON: The one difference is when it's hitting a country's pocketbook, and that's when you start to see countries, even countries like Germany start to come out, and German policymakers say, "This is not okay." The EU, remember, is a trade block. That's what they're focused on, trade. And so that's why I think their cackles are sort of up on this, and they've been fighting this sort of fight for a little while with us. I think when you look at the data, Beijing, this is shocking, but they actually maintain a surprisingly strong track record of complying with WTO rulings when the United States or other countries bring a complaint against them. The problem is that we don't bring enough of them, and that currently, the WTO dispute settlement mechanism is really incapable of addressing all of China's trade violations, a number of which sort of fall outside the scope of WTO's current rules.

SINGLETON: And so, while it's imperfect, of all of the international organizations, when you're talking about dispute settlement and having something that can actually be effective when functioning properly, the WTO, it's up there. It doesn't work right now for a variety of different reasons and we're pushing for reform, but of all the international organizations, this one costs us nothing. It's a few million dollars a year, and it has actually shown tremendous value, even as slow as the process is to sort of take on some of these facets of China's distinctive economy. So that's one where I say there's a lot of opportunity space, but to Emily's point, as we look at technology, as we look at thinking through what the world will look like in 10 years, in terms of commerce and trade and the role of tech and governance in the internet, or whatever comes after the internet, we don't have rules that are actually there, digital currencies on e-trade.

SINGLETON: Those are all key problems that we're sort of going to have to confront going forward, and if the U.S. is at the table to negotiate those sorts of treaties, I would feel a lot better about the world then than if we're not there.

MAY: Those are fair points, but I also want to mention this, Emily, mention it to you and see what you have to say. China is not at all shy or reluctant to punish those nations that offended in any way with economic measures, by saying to Australia, "Okay, you want a serious investigation of the origins of COVID? Well, you ain't selling your wine in this country," or saying



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to the Norwegians, "You've got a high-tech company? It's not doing business here if Huawei is not doing business there." They're pretty tough in a way, I'm not sure, in a way I don't think the U.S. is currently. Am I right?

BRUYÈRE: I like that you got an optimistic spin from Craig, so then you have to send this back to me.

MAY: I depend on you for pessimism. I appreciate that greatly, Emily.

BRUYÈRE: I mean, yes, agreed. And I guess this is where I would push back, Craig, on the idea that, of Europe in particular, as a key ally on the trade questions at resisting China's, what will we call it, China's offensive. And that's that, yes, Europe is a trade block. Yes, key European countries are aware of what China is doing, but they're also so dependent on China and so unwilling to prompt precisely the kind of economic pushback that Beijing is adept at and willing to threaten. And Germany is the obvious example here. Germany is and has shown itself to be pretty tied to trade with China, investment from China, even high-tech deals with China, and unwilling to take the lead in Europe, despite what you think should be their proclivities in terms of free and fair trade at any kind of resistance.

SINGLETON: The one thing I would come back at you with is when Merkel's gone—I think it's a Merkel question. Merkel was so forceful in pushing through the CAI, and everyone that's coming behind her seems to have a stronger view on China. Now granted, it's imperfect, and the Europeans, you're right, are sitting there kind of very concerned about a post-COVID economy, and you can't cut off and completely decouple with them, but I do think we are starting to see some chinks in the armor. And on the Australia example, the Chinese lost. They're actually importing some of that ore now and that coal, and I think the world's stood back. Other countries stepped in and bought Chinese wine. It was—

MAY: I'm definitely doing that.

SINGLETON: I mean, they make a wonderful Syrah. I mean, go out there. I encourage everyone who's listening to go out and have a glass of wine, but the Australians have actually sort of, I think, pierced the bubble a little bit on this front, because they actually were able to withstand some of this intense pressure over the last year and sort of up until this moment. I think it's fair to say if you piss off the Chinese, they're going to come after you economically, and they absolutely did with Australia, being a great example with ore and barley and wine and I think iron, maybe. But the Australians, to their credit, have actually sort of come out on the other side, and have sat back and said, "We're willing to absorb it because we're going to stand up for what we think."

SINGLETON: If that's a scalable model, I don't know, but it does make me feel a little better that other countries in the region—And Australia, we talk about them. They're a very small country. They have less people than Taiwan. It's 24 million people in Australia. If they can stand up to a country like China, and other countries like the United States and Japan and India are willing to pick up some of the slack and help them out, that gives me an interesting model going forward. It's imperfect for sure, and the Europeans tend to be an absolute mess, dysfunctional mess on these things, but maybe we're seeing, maybe we're turning the corner. I'm going to be the eternal optimist here, Cliff.

MAY: This has been a fascinating conversation. I'm more pessimistic along with Emily than I am optimistic along with Craig, but I'll keep reading everything you guys write. Thank you for your good work. To be continued, and thanks to all of you out there who are also listening to these conversations. We're glad to have you. Let us know what you think. Criticize, compliment, make suggestions for other subjects you'd like to hear about, and we'll talk to you again right here on *Foreign Policy*.