

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
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Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

Contending with China: A Transatlantic Perspective

Guest:

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TIERSKY: Hello, and welcome back to Helsinki on the Hill, a series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond. I'm your host, Alex Tiersky.

Listeners, I want to start today's episode with a quote: "China presents the United States and its partners with the most serious set of challenges they have faced since the Cold War. The scope of those challenges is global, their potential impact is deep. Left unaddressed, they will harm the fundamental vital interests of democratic nations everywhere." End quote. Listeners, those are the stark opening lines from a major report published by the Atlantic Council, a D.C. think tank, in March. The report is called "The China Plan." And today we'll be talking with one of its authors, researcher and journalist Didi Kirsten Tatlow.

Didi, thank you so much for coming on our show today.

TATLOW: Thank you very much, Alex.

TIERSKY: And, Didi, can you tell us where you're calling from?

TATLOW: So I live in Berlin, in Germany, and have been here for four years, since leaving China. I was in Beijing for 14 years before that, and as a journalist.

TIERSKY: Thank you, again, for calling in transatlantic for this episode.

As you and I have talked about, we want to give our listeners a better sense of the state of the transatlantic conversation about China. Didi, you've been a reporter and a columnist in Asia and Europe for more than 20 years, including at the South China Morning Post and at The New York Times. As you mentioned, you're currently based in Berlin, as a senior fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations. And I understand you're also working with a Prague-based think tank called Project Sinopsis. And crucially, I love this, so your Twitter handle includes the notation "Hong Konger by birth, Hong Konger by choice." Did I miss anything crucial?

TATLOW: No, I think you've pretty much summed it, up, especially the Hong Konger bit.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) Well, Didi, clearly you are extraordinarily well placed to talk to us about both China and the transatlantic space. So let's dive into it. As I mentioned in the introduction, I was really struck by the report you contributed to from the Atlantic Council, "The China Plan." Can you tell us a little bit more about why you participated in the drafting of the report, what you and the other authors hoped to accomplish with it?

TATLOW: Right. You know, I think we were trying to really get a grip on something that is a very, very major challenge – in fact, you could say an epochal kind of shift. And that is the rise of China. And this is a historical event, if you like. It's going to happen. It is happening. And what does that mean for us? You know, and by "us" I mean anyone, really, who lives outside of and believes in values which are different from those propagated by the

Communist Party of China. And that's, of course, a very broad, global group of people and countries. And it's in the so-called West, but it's also, of course, many industrialized democracies or non-industrialized countries in Asia, for example, also in Africa, South America.

TIERSKY: So, as you described, the report clearly has big ambitions and a terrifically large scope. We asked you today for this episode to talk specifically to a set of issues that's hear and dear to us at the Helsinki Commission. It's really the issues of human rights, governance, and values, I think, that are principal in our mandate and, of course, in the transatlantic space. So what I would propose is to have a conversation in roughly three parts. The first set of questions I want to talk with you about are exactly how the – I want to understand better how the Chinese government is posing challenges to what we, as you mentioned, the West or the transatlantic community, what we would describe as universal notions of governance and human rights.

The second basket of issues I think I'd like to hear your thoughts on are what might stand in the way of unity in our response to these challenges. And the last basket really is it's crucial to hear, I think, some really important recommendations that you and your coauthors have made specifically in this space. So what should our response look like? If that sounds good to you?

TATLOW: Yeah, I mean, absolutely. It's really a – it really is a huge topic. It's complex and the thing always to try to do is to simplify it so that everyone, including myself frankly, can kind of get their head around it and understand what it is – what is the best thing to do. Because there are really big things at stake here, I think.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Understanding, you know, for the purposes of this episode and in the limited time that we have we're going to stay more or less at the wavetops, let's start with challenges by the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party, to what we would consider universal notions of governance and human rights. You've already alluded to this. Would the Chinese Community Party agree that our concepts of rule of law, democracy, individual freedoms are universal at all?

TATLOW: Well, no. That's the thing, they don't, frankly. The Communist Party of China does not think that there's anything inevitable, God-given, if you like, about the concepts of universalism that are enshrined in the United Nations, in all those treaties. Most famous, of course, the declaration – the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because we need to – we need to remember that the Chinese Communist Party came to power through revolution, through force in 1949, after fighting a long and awful civil war. And you know, although it did have – one of the original signatories of the U.N.'s Declaration of Human Rights was, in fact, Chinese, he was from the other side – the losing side of the civil war, if you like.

We still don't know what will happen exactly with China. Will it really become what some people think it will? That's still not sure. But essentially one that feels like it wasn't part of those original agreements on what is so-called universalist about human rights and how they're expressed, you know, who runs the show, and all that kind of stuff. So, yeah, they are, if you like, a revisionist power. They want to change the way the world is, and not just accept it, and fit in, and join, and go along, that kind of thing.

TIERSKY: How is that different conception of what, say, individual rights might look like – how is that expressed in today’s China, and the way the Chinese Communist Party governs at home? Your report, for example, cites extraordinarily troubling issues relating to state control, surveillance. Can you talk to us a little bit about what that looks like in China today?

TATLOW: I guess the thing – you know, China – and, when I say China, I really am talking about the Communist Party, because there is no other show in town, right? And so they get to sort of lay down, you know, how things are. And, you know, there have been a huge amount of challenges, individually and sometimes more organized, to that power. Most of them on the individual level, if you like, like differently thinking. And they tend to just be crushed. So we are dealing with a bit of a monolith here.

And I think that the fundamental difference is that, you know, the Communist Party comes out a system where concepts of human rights are considered – or, were considered, for a long time, very sort of, quote/unquote, “bourgeois,” and, you know, the product of a class system which was fundamentally, per se, unfair, that, you know, rich people exploited poor people. And that all needed changing. So that’s the – kind of the legacy that they have there. And what it’s become in China is a very, very economically expressed sense of rights.

So the Chinese government and the party frequently argue that the only really important human right is that of economic wellbeing, and beyond subsistence. What they’re aiming for now is something called – (speaks in Chinese) – if I may use just a couple of Chinese words – a “small basket society.” Which sounds a bit odd, but what it basically means is a form of modest well-being, that people can live free of fear from not being economically OK. And, you know, that’s not to be sneezed at. That’s an important thing in life – very important, in fact.

But having said that, I think that, you know, it’s clear that this argument is also open to exploitation. And it becomes a way of saying, well, no, I mean, it doesn’t matter what you think. We don’t have to give you justice. We don’t have to change what we do. Because we’re already enabling you to access the most important human right, according to them, and that’s enough. So, you know, be quiet. Go away. End of politics. There is no political discussion really committed beyond that point. You know, politics just kind of dies.

TIERSKY: Sure. And the inherent tradeoff there is a small basket of prosperity, I suppose, in exchange for access to information, or the freedom to exercise religion, or to assemble and have kind of a conversation among a number of people, I suppose.

TATLOW: Right. For example, I mean, the tradeoff is absolutely – it’s, you know, stability, a certain level of economic wellbeing, order, very important, a sense of an absence of chaos, if you’d like. There’s another Chinese word, hǔnlùn, which means chaos. And this is, you know, really strongly emphasized in China as an intrinsically fundamentally bad thing. I think that the Chinese leaders really do see democracy as a system as being one that produces a lot of chaos, because it very much emphasizes individual demands, needs, and rights. And this automatically sets people against each other.

Now, it doesn't have to be like that, of course. But I think it does help somewhat understand where they're coming from on that. The actually very unfortunate thing, of course, about all of this is that while economics and financial well-being is, of course, extremely important, it is by far not enough. Because if you don't have other rights, you can't even necessarily secure your physical or your economic subsistence, because you may run in to insuperable problems in trying to achieve that, but you have no way of addressing it, no way of really getting there. So that's where there rule of law comes in as this incredibly important thing. And really, any society that doesn't have it, you know, has a lot of unseen victims, I think. That's what it boils down to.

And, you know, China doesn't have a rule of law. Instead, they've come up with something called the social credit system and many other measures which, in a sense, attempts to substitute themselves to something like the rule of law. You know, to create some kind of justice without even – or some kind of balance, or some sort of orderly behavior, you know, to regulate public behavior without going down the actual rule of law road.

TIERSKY: But, Didi, could you talk to us a little bit about how the Chinese Communist Party's aversion to chaos and need for control, how are those things expressed on some of the highest profile human rights concerns that we in the West read about in the headlines, whether it's the Uyghurs, whether it's the political situation in Hong Kong, or even Tibet, for example?

TATLOW: Right. Well, you know, it's interesting because I think right now where we are in time, if you like, 2021, and we've had this pandemic now for nearly two years. And I think that things have really become very clear in China what it is that the government thinks it can offer people, and how its desire for control expresses itself. Basically, at this point in China, you know, you have your mobile phone. And you can't really even leave the house without it because, you know, you need to have your code. Am I healthy, am I not? Where am I going? You know, is that place healthy, et cetera. So a whole bunch of different measures that come in/come out. And, you know, this really speaks to a very granular control of individuals by the party state.

And you know, we see that then extended all over the place to, of course you mentioned the Uyghur regions. But Tibet for a long time now has been – a kind of a friend of mine who married a Tibetan, actually, she's actually a – well, she's a Chinese woman. Went to Tibet way back in 2013, or something. And came back and said, you know, Didi, this place is actually like an open-air prison. It's really, really horrible. We are – you know, you and I just met. You were tracked, and, you're – you know, they've got these security systems everywhere. And there are all these sort of traps where you're checked and everything.

So, you know, that is a really long ongoing problem. It's happening in the Chinese homeland too, which would be outside of the Tibet and Uyghur regions. And in Hong Kong, where I was born and raised, you know, we're really seeing the harsh edge of this. And what we're actually seeing is the imposition of this kind of repressive control over the details of daily life in a way that really demonstrates what happens when this kind of system, you know, bumps up against, takes over an open society. Because Hong Kong was tremendously open and, you know, had an excellent rule of law system. And, you know, we're seeing everything.

For example, just in the last few days we've had – there was a new marathon run in Hong Kong. And people who turned up with, you know, “Go Hong Kong” written on their shorts, which would actually in sports be a pretty normal message, were surrounded by the police, taken off to a tent, you know, photographed, had their passes photographed, told to change their shorts, you know? Luckily, some had teammates who had other shorts that didn't have words on them. We're seeing, you know, on Sunday Amnesty International will shut its office in Hong Kong.

A third thing just yesterday would be the end of free choice in terms of who can represent you as a public defense lawyer. So if you're in a criminal case and you've got money for defense, your public defender – you can't choose your public defender anymore because the Hong Kong government believes that there's a little group of lawyers who are doing too liberal work or, you know, pushing social justice issues. So they've just changed that. So, you know, from these three different kinds of examples you can see how it really interferes down into a very granular way into daily life.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Didi, your – the report that you contributed to makes it – you make a terrific linkage in that report between the oppression that the Chinese Communist Party imposes internally and on the individuals to an extension of that to the international system and outside of China. And here I'm thinking of Chinese – the Chinese approach to international organizations and norms, the Chinese Communist Party's use of disinformation, the use of bullyism as a diplomatic tool, you know, the Lithuanian Foreign Minister was in Washington a couple of weeks ago talking about how they're facing a lot of Chinese pressure over their relationship with Taiwan.

Can you give us a few words on how, again the Chinese Communist Party's desire for control and stability at home, and of course its own continued governance of China, how that expresses itself outside of China?

TATLOW: Yeah, you know, so I'm in Germany, in Berlin. And just recently in two other German cities in fact, Hanover and Duisburg, we had two authors, two German authors, very well known, who tried to do book presentations of their biography of Xi Jinping. And those were blocked by the universities in question because they were going to take place in these Confucius Institutes, which are, you know, under the propaganda ministry's control in Beijing, but unfortunately lodged in universities overseas. And I think this is a good example of the sort of the thought control, the mind control that the Communist Party extends overseas, which sustains what it conducts at home, and how it's actually concretely impacting on us.

And, you know, why do they do that? Well, they do that because they feel – well, obviously they feel immensely threatened by criticism of – especially of a leader like Xi Jinping, who's a very special kind of leader, if you like. You know, he's doing things differently. But also I think that there are issues of face, if you like, which relate to bigger issues. They don't like to – they don't really think that people should come out and just sort of bluntly criticize their system and their people. I'm talking here again about the Communist Party, of course. You know, so it's a very different way of going at politics.

And in order to – if you like, to preserve their own power at home – because at the end of the day, you know, the Communist Party wants to sort of rule forever. They don't envisage – they don't have a system that can really change. They don't envisage alternatives. You know, they need to control the outside environment in order that it should not infect the inside environment in China.

So it then becomes a kind of a two-way or a kind of a multiple feedback loop, a vicious circle some might say, or a virtuous circle some of us might say, you know, of trying to manage and control the discussion, the opinions, the views, the beliefs, the judgements made abroad about China, in order to smooth China's path towards, you know, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the world stage, which is what, of course, they are aiming for by the 2049.

TIERSKY: Didi, your example of the German academics on German soil being blocked from presenting their biographies is really telling. Can you give us an example or two, for instance, I mean, is this problem of Chinese pressure above the level of individuals? Is there a government-to-government dynamic going on there as well?

TATLOW: Yeah, I mean, there is. It's – I think that, you know, some countries have really not talked about this very publicly. And I think the publics don't always hear very frank talk, if you like, or haven't in the past, from their leaders about the kinds of pressures that they may be subject to from the party state. You know, and I think one reason for this is that we've been for decades now caught in the sort of relationship where we've looked away from the problems that China faces for our own open societies and political systems.

And, you know, I think actually we've had – to be honest, I think we've had relatively poor leadership in many places in the democratic countries on this issue. And we do need better leadership. You know, and when I say better leadership, I mean leadership that just sort of says things like they are and has more courage to actually highlight the problems. So, you know, what are the problems? I guess, you know, we – in international bodies, for example, we see a lot of pressure being brought to bear to support China's views on things.

And it's very telling that, in fact, one of the major venues for this has been the human rights commission –

TIERSKY: Mmm hmm, at the United Nations.

TATLOW: At the United Nations. The Human Rights Committee, rather, because, of course, human rights and concepts of rights are – you know, lie at the heart of the dispute that I think we have with the government in Beijing, with very different, you know, views on how they want to the world to be, or their own country's to be. And so we've seen a huge push by China. So when you get countries like – Venezuela, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, places like this which have, at best, mixed – at best – records on these issues, you know, going along with China because they are being promised things. And we very often don't know exactly what's being promised.

I think in terms of – in terms of investment and debt that very often in these contracts that China – party, state – you know, or its state-owned enterprises, for example, are making with

overseas countries that there are hidden traps in these contracts. There's a lot of – there's collateral. There's also a foreign policy element. You know, for example, that a country needs to follow China's political line internationally on issues such as Taiwan, for example. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China to be recovered by military force, if necessary. That's just one example. We've got Tibet. We've got the Uyghurs. We've got Hong Kong issues. But we've got South China Sea issues.

And we've also increasingly got issues of whether or not we are allowed outside of China to criticize China. And we touched on that earlier, but it really is at this point, across a very broad range of peoples – sports, people, companies. Car companies in Germany, you know, doing a little Dalai Lama quote in an ad and then having to apologize not once but three times before the Chinese Foreign Ministry sort of stops thundering about how they transgressed–

TIERSKY: Yeah.

TATLOW: Yes. So, you know, it's really a very different worldview.

TIERSKY: Didi, given the both overt and covert mechanisms of influence that you've described for us by the Chinese Communist Party, things that we can see and things that are hidden, that really brings me to kind of the second basket of questions I want to ask you, which is to what extent are we, quote/unquote “the transatlantic community,” unified in our approach to China? And if – assuming a unified approach is what you would argue is necessary – I think I read that in the report chapter – the chapter suggests that these particular challenges in areas of governance and human rights have the potential to be the areas of greatest potential convergence on China in the transatlantic community. So talk to us a little bit about, you know, where are we? Are we rowing in the same direction? If not, who's not rowing in the same direction? Why? And what should we do about it?

TATLOW: You know, I think we are become more aware of the problem. We are seeing more public recognition, pushback. And the German example of the biography of Xi Jinping, it may be now that after a storm of reaction in Germany, you know, I also did, like, an interview on national TV and I made my points quite clearly, I think – you know, that they may indeed in the end hold an event. So it goes to show that if you push back you can gain a lot.

Now, one of the problems is that we haven't been pushing back. We've just been saying, oh, gosh, no. You can't annoy China. No, no, you mustn't do that. No, gosh, they might react badly. And this is, of course, nonsense, because you do indeed have to push back. You do have to insist. And I think that we're getting a little bit better at that. However, we've said that on the – on the smiley side of things, if you like. There's also a grumbly side of things, which is that we're not internally unified, you know?

So, for example, in Germany even there are people who absolutely refuse to see this challenge, and then there are those who absolutely do see this challenge. And there's an awful lot of sort of fighting and debate going on about that. Which is fine. These are open societies. And a lot of that happens. It's supposed to happen. It does happen. Democracy's a process, et

cetera. I get it. But, you know, so therefore we still need to kind of deal with these problems domestically, let alone connect or create some kind of a transatlantic consensus on this issue.

And here I also see my research has shown that in the United States as well there are a lot of areas really where there's a lot of influencing and interfering happening. And they're simply not being addressed. People don't want to go there. People are afraid of being accused, for example, of being racist. This is a concern I understand. And I think, you know, this would be a good moment to point out, as I think I already did, that when I talk about China or Chinese, I'm really talking about the Communist Party here. And as I specified early on, this is a political issue. It is not a racial issue. Absolutely not, 100 percent.

And, you know, I was a journalist for many years. I still sometimes do journalism. And even when I write for U.S. publications, I notice how people are really only – some of them are prepared only to go so far. They don't really want to name the major problems, which are pretty tyrannical in nature, actually. The fact that we do have a dictatorship which is, at best, authoritarian, I think actually going towards totalitarian because of its technology abilities now, surveillance, control of people, this kind of thing. And that it is increasingly impacting on us through its technology, through its money – you know, through its economic influence. And we're just kind of pretending that, well, a lot of this isn't happening. Now, I think that this is worse in Europe. I think in the U.S. you're in a somewhat different place.

TIERSKY: Huh. Well, Didi, this actually is a nice segue to really the heart of the matter, in the last few minutes that we have here. You've just made a very compelling call to push back. And you said we're increasingly on the same page, but that we need to push back. What does that look like? Can you give us some specifics? What does it look like for a collective pushback on some of these pernicious Chinese Communist Party tendrils reaching out into the international system in particular, as well as what we should be doing in terms of their own actions within China itself?

TATLOW: Yeah. You know, in the Atlantic Council report, which you so kindly mentioned, there's a very specific recommendation for a transatlantic council on China. And the idea is that we really need to get together in far bigger numbers and talk about what we can do about this. And for now, I mean, I would say, for example, something on the scale of the Helsinki Commission would be a kind of a model, because we need more than just a transatlantic – you know, transatlantic understanding and pushback. We need something that reaches into eastern Asia, we need something that goes to Australia, we need to include Africa, South America where possible. So it needs to be on a much bigger scale than just, if you like, inverted commas, than just the EU and the U.S., although that's, of course, a really great start.

You know, I think that concretely we simply need to, if possible, form some kind of a consensus that, A, there is a serious challenge out there. B, it will affect us. And, C, let's get together and talk about what our open societies and our democracies mean to us, and the rule of law most importantly, and how can we defend it? Because a lot of the problem is that, you know, people have grown up in great – in a position of great privilege, almost. You know, political freedoms are hard won. And our – you know, our ancestors, our forebearers have fought awfully for them. Nobody wants to go back there.

So it really is, in a sense, upon us to get together and to accept that we need to take this seriously, and we need to a little bit grow up, if you like. We need to actually treat this with the respect that it deserves, this problem.

TIERSKY: Didi, one last question before I let you go. How optimistic are you in terms of the broad sweep of our relations with China? Are we going in the right direction?

TATLOW: We're going fairly slowly in the right direction. And I would wish for much more speed. I'd wish much more moral clarity, particularly in Europe if I may say so. I can't comment so much on the U.S. I'm not there. But I do see enormous networks of interest, political networks, functioning here in Europe which are steered, guided, or controlled by the Communist Party, which aim at things like technology transfer. And I wish that we would start there on the practical level and just say, look, we need to identify what these are. We need to really cast light on this. We need to make the situation more transparent. And I think that that work needs to be done in the U.S. as well.

TIERSKY: Didi, terrific, terrific words to end on. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, thank you so much for being on our podcast today. I encourage all of our listeners to follow you on social media. I know you're quite active there. I'd like to give a special shoutout to your chapter co-author in the report Clementine Starling, who unfortunately couldn't be with us today but helped us to organize this episode. Any final words you'd like to close with?

TATLOW: Oh, gosh. Yeah, please don't forget about Hong Kong. Hong Kong is going through hard times. And a shoutout to Clem, absolutely.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) Didi, thank you, again, for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill.

With that, listeners, we've come to the end of another episode. We're always interested in hearing from you, as you know. And you know how to get in touch with us. Thanks, again. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

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