

[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 143. The world looks to Beijing, Putin vs. Africa, and Rory's sliding Brexit doors

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So welcome to another episode of The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart. And just to give everybody a sense of where we are,

I'm in Jordan in what, Alistair, what was your rude word about my shirt?

Penrith Vett. Penrith Vett. Well, I am quite complimented because your father was a vet, so I'm feeling quite chid up about that. Exactly, yeah. He wore a lot of shirts like that.

Very good. Okay, lovely. Okay, well, I'm not so insulted after all.

And as you said earlier, I'm wearing a sort of Tony Soprano special, very loose-fitting flowery.

It's quite difficult to describe. Loose-fitting blue with a lot of white patterns on it. I think

if I was a conspiracy theorist, I might get into what that pattern is. We may have to

show an image of that for our devoted listeners. Right, now, Alistair, what were the things you wanted to talk about today? Well, I think we're going to have to talk about the Johnson situation.

We're recording this on Monday prior to the vote on the Privileges Committee report.

So we should talk about that. I'd like to talk about Brexit. I'd like to get your advice to me for my appearance on the Question-Type Paddle on Thursday with a leave of voting only audience.

And maybe that's a chance just to reflect a little bit on what happened seven years ago

this week with the referendum. And then I think we should, maybe the second half,

we should focus on abroad, as we often do. I think it's just been announced that Blinken did

indeed meet Xi Jinping in Beijing today. So that's quite a big thing. And then I'm also

fascinated by this visit of a collection of African leaders to see Vladimir Putin and

Vladimir Zelensky. So maybe we should do that in the second half. But let's kick off with

Johnson. Let me just ask you this question, Roy. If you were still an MP, I am assuming you would vote

to support the report. Well, with enormous joy. I mean, I think for a couple of reasons. I mean, obviously, I think that Boris Johnson is a disgrace. And he's a disgrace because

at the core of his threat to Britain is his lack of respect for the rule of law, his lack of respect for parliament, his lack of respect for lying to parliament, his lack of respect for parliamentary committees, all of which makes a real kind of disgusting mockery of his claim to care about the sovereignty of parliament and all the things that he apparently fought Brexit about.

But I think the second reason I'd vote is it's a committee where there are people like Alberto Costa, who I like on that committee, they did a serious job. They came up with a serious conclusion and the conclusion is pretty unambiguous. I am very surprised at Rishi Sunak, who did a quite pathetic interview this morning on Good Morning Britain. He's got into this habit now of doing this thing where he he literally just keeps saying the same thing again and again and again.

So the reporter is getting more and more frustrated. I think she genuinely couldn't understand why he couldn't just bring himself to say he was voting or he wasn't voting, instead of which he kept saying, this is a matter of a parliament, not the government.

And I don't want to influence other people. I'm sorry, leadership is about influencing other people and taking them in the direction you think they should go in. So I think he's making a complete mess of this Johnson thing. He's carrying on with these absurd honours.

We now know that one of the people who's going to the House of Lords, Sean Bailey,

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it was his event that this new video that's emerged of clearly what was just a straightforward out and out party with dancing and drinking and laughter and frolics and fun. Apparently the invitation said mingle and jingle, let's mingle and jingle. And that was that was the Tory candidates to be mayor of London and felt the guy that I was running against. Yeah, exactly. So he's going to the House of Lords, even though we now know, well, we knew it already that he'd had this party. We've now seen this, this video and social media today, Rory, it's just a wash with people saying, I couldn't bury my dad. I couldn't see my mom when she was dying. I couldn't hold my brother's hand when he was dying, all this sort of stuff. And there's another one who's in the wearing ridiculous Union Jack braces that's sort of in there going for an OBE or something. So Soonak's letting that go through in the process, I think, embarrassing your friend, the King. And the second thing where I think he's letting himself down is in not using this report to signal that when he said he believed in professionalism, integrity and accountability, he meant it. Instead of which he looks like he's taking the cowards way out, which is to abstain and doubtless find some ridiculous reason not to be in Parliament this afternoon. A couple of things on that. I think the first thing is to understand what that suggests about the tensions and divisions within the Conservative Party. So why is it he's not doing it? He's not doing it because the Conservative Party is being torn apart with a strong but not overwhelming Boris Johnson faction that he has to deal with. Remember, almost 100 MPs were still prepared to vote for Boris Johnson against him when Liz Truss stepped down. And there are all these figures like Jacob Riesmog out there briefing against him, campaigning against him, money being raised against him. And then John Curtis saying that if Boris Johnson teamed up with Nigel Farage, he'd be able to set up a right wing party which would destroy any hope that the Conservative Party had in the next election. So I think somewhere in Rishi Soonak's calculation is trying to deal with the threat of Boris Johnson setting up some Farage-style party, trying to deal with the fact that Boris Johnson remains quite popular with some chunks of the Conservative Party, not all, but some chunks of the Conservative Party and some form of internal party management going on. So I agree. I mean, it's really depressing, but it's a sign of how fractured the party is. And I think a sign of the fact that Rishi Soonak doesn't feel as strong towards the party as you'd like. But the point is that you have to seize these moments when strength is offered to you. The fact is that report is so damning of Johnson that it was the potential for an inflection point for Soonak's leadership, I think, where he could come out and say, there is now no doubt about it. We were wrong about this guy. And he could come out and say, I'm sorry, somebody whose reputation is now so solid by his peers producing this report, it is absurd to think he should have a resignation on his list. His career is finished. While I'm leader of this party, he's finished. And I think that gives him strength. And on the popularity point, Rory, the last survey I saw of the, I can't remember if it was Conservative Home, but one of the sort of, you know, the Conservative Sporting Websites, 20% were assenting to the proposition that Johnson should return as Conservative leader. Now, that's in the wake of all this focus that's been on him right now. That's pretty low. And as for the public, you'll really enjoy this one. Because JL partners... That's my friend JJ. We like talking about JL partners. I'm about to quote them doing something for the Tony Blair Institute too. Anyway, what did they say? Sorry. Okay, good. Well, they conducted a popularity poll over 2000 Britons. Now Soonak's rating is

minus 26%. That's not very good. However, it's better than Xi Jinping, who's at minus 40. And it's better than Philip Schofield, who's at minus 39. And it's much, much better that Boris Johnson is at minus 45. This myth, this myth that Boris Johnson is popular, his rating is lower than Philip Schofield and the President of China. Now, I think it's shocking. One of the things that has been interesting, I think, is that Keir Starmer seems to have been listening to you and has said that he's not going to do a resignation honours list. You were very proud that Tony Blair didn't do one. And it now seems as though Keir Starmer's not going to do one. Well, I do think one thing, this whole thing has thrown into sharp relief, is the absurdity of our honour system. And I thought that we had the honours at the weekend with Anna Winter, companion of honour and Ian Wright being

upgraded from an MBO to an OBA. And I sort of had in mind your point about, there should be something

special that I certainly feel that anybody who now feels that their award is on a par with one of these that Johnson has given out, I think demeans it. But Chris Bryant treated something very interesting this morning, because he's just against my wishes. He's just accepted a knighthood. And he says that he did a treat, it goes as follows. The letter you receive from the palace when you're offered an honour says, recipients are expected to be role models and quotes should be aware that membership can be forfeited for a variety of reasons, including criminal conviction, and bringing the honour system into disrepute. Well, every single honour that Johnson has ever given has brought the honour system into disrepute. And just to return to my charge on my new theory, which is that Prime Ministerial honours should be completely separate from the normal system. So someone like Ian Wright, who's had an amazing story, done an incredible amount, both in terms of his commentary and his social work and a great footballer gets an honour. But it's the same honour being given to a slightly junior member of Boris Johnson's staff. So let's separate them off, because, and this is the point at which I'm going to get into a rant that will make you a little bit uncomfortable. The truth of the matter is, it's a disgrace whoever's doing it. Remember, of course, when you were in power, the House of Lords Appointment Committee managed to rule against a lot of the appointments that Tony Blair was trying to make. And there were three criminal investigations. There was a man who was going to be Lord Patel, who gave £1.7 million worth of loans to the Labour Party in exchange for becoming a Lord. No, not in exchange. You can't say in exchange. In exchange, I will rebut, but carry on. Okay. This guy who coincidentally gave £1.7 million of loans to the Labour Party was all set to become a peer until the House of Lords Appointment Committee questioned that as it did others. Furthermore, 2006, you guys gave a knighthood to the big monster of all, Philip Green, not paying any UK tax, ripping off pension holders. Bad. So basically, none of these people should be doing. And here I'm going non-party. Boris Johnson's a disgrace. Labour Party was a disgrace. All these people get overruled by the House of Lords Appointment Committee, because they're all trying to give money to their mates and people who contribute to their parties. And we should stop it all. And I agree. Listen, and bearing mind, Rory, at this point, and have been at this point most of my life, I've said to you before, part of my job was to, I had to go and announce the honours. I had to brief the press about how marvellous it was that we had X percent of black people and X percent of teachers and all this sort of stuff. I saw the whole thing was nonsense. I hate the honours system with the passion,

but I don't think you can quite compare what Boris Johnson is trying to do now with any other Prime Minister. And your point the other day about Tony putting in peers, that was because we had an elected big majority in the House of Commons, but found that in the House of Lords, they could resist pretty much anything because we had such an inbuilt majority against us. That was the only reason why we're putting all these people into the Lords. And a lot of them, to be fair to them, are still there day in, day out, kind of working away. But the Lords also has hundreds of people who either aren't there or are only there for their allowance. And by the way, while we're still on Boris Johnson, I still want to know, I still want to know what on earth Charlotte Owen and Ross Kempson have done. These two children,

and one of my favourite lines in an interview with John Major was when he said leaders are getting younger, the next Tory leader but two will be pre-puberty. I mean, we're kind of almost there in the House of Lords. So what is going on with Charlotte Owen and Ross Kempson? Could our media please find out? Can you remember what was going on in February 2006 with a man called

Barry Townsley, who was put up for a period, who was under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office? Oh Lord, was that one of Labour's? Yeah, March 2006, nominated, followed by property millionaires Sir David Garrard, who withdrew his name, followed by Sir Gulam Noon. I mean, you tried to get quite a lot through that the House of Lords appointment committee were not that happy with. No, in my defence story, I left in 2003 and I was always against it. And by the way, I could have been on that list myself, but I've always said no.

Thank goodness you weren't. Right, as you're getting on your high horse now, so would you tell me, would you accept a knighthood? Yes or no?

I think it depends what I was given it for and who was giving it to me. So I hope I would never have accepted something from Boris Johnson. I would never have accepted something if it was a bribe for shutting up or not doing something I believed in. But I did accept an OBE when I was in Iraq for doing what I thought was a decent job in Iraq and I was proud to do that. And I think that's what the Honours system should be there to do. So you're now on a par with Boris Johnson's hairdresser? Exactly, that's right. That was I being shot out in Iraq and it's just the same as cutting Boris Johnson's hair. Actually, to be honest, probably she was about as successful in cutting Boris Johnson's hair as I was in Iraq. So anyway, let's should we leave the whole sort of thing? I mean, I do think I think Sunak is mishandling this pretty badly. I think he's missing a bigger opportunity on Keir Starmer. I think it's absolutely absurd. I think he should go further and actually say there has to be a fundamental review of not just the Honours but the House of Lords as well. And he's announced that one as well. But shall we move on to Brexit? And if you remember, when I did the Radio 4 program with Jacob Rees-Mogg and also that guy from the CBI who's since had to leave the CBI, Tony Danker. Yes, that guy who made nice comments about the Labour Party and then disappeared under a cloud. And Claire Fox. But I remember you giving me some

very, very good advice about how to deal with Jacob Rees-Mogg. So similar situation Thursday possibly, question time in Clacton and the BBC and their wisdom, the audience is made up 100% of people who voted leave in 2016. Now, so far the panel is me, Anand Menon, who is a sort of professor type who will be the man to go to for the facts and the economics and so forth.

And at this stage, that's it. It would seem that they're really struggling to find anybody who could defend Brexit to an audience of people who voted for it. What does that tell us about the state of the politics of Brexit? Well, it's going to be amazing, isn't it? I think the only thing to be aware of with Anand Menon, who is unbelievably clever and unbelievably well informed, is that he's got a very cunning way of playing abusively sort of objective, thoughtful. I'm slightly above all this, I'm going to give you the context thing and you're going to be stuck in there as the raging remainder. So would you advise me not to rage or should I rage? No, I think you should, Alistair. That's what people are paying for. No, seriously, come on, give me some give me some serious advice.

Now, what is my tone? I would say, I don't know how you feel about this, but I'd be tempted to try to find a way of reaching out to that audience and saying, listen, I understand a little bit about what you were voting for. I understand why you felt really pissed off and you've been let down, you've been betrayed. There were perfectly good reasons why you wanted to vote for Brexit and you've been totally, totally betrayed. These guys have sold you down the road.

I think that's right. I do think it's interesting that they seem unable to find anybody to sort of defend Brexit. I presume that it's quite a scary thought just to go for me to be in a room full of people who voted leave. And actually, interestingly, I'm visiting a school in Clacton on the way, which I think will be interesting because I'm really keen to find out what young people in Clacton think as well. Yeah, I mean, Clacton is so interesting just for a second on that. Clacton was important in my parliamentary life because it was the seat of a guy called Douglas Caswell, who was one of my conservative colleagues who went into full rebellion against David Cameron, defected to UKIP, triggered a by-election and then managed to win the by-election for UKIP, which was a real kind of sort of shaking moment for David Cameron. And I think in some ways, accelerated Cameron giving this referendum. So, Clacton's right at the heart of the whole story. No, I think that's why Clacton did become so central. Also, Nigel Farage targeted it. He went no lot. Caswell, by the way, now lives in Mississippi. I saw him yesterday's Sunday Times. Nigel Farage has a TV show. Jacob Wiesmog has moved his money

to Ireland. Boris Johnson, we all know about him. Michael Gove was on television yesterday, apologizing for God knows what. I mean, it is quite interesting how there's bound to be some people who just say, I voted Brexit. I'm glad that I did because of whatever. But I've honestly, I've been doing a bit of research. I've been looking at all the facts and the economic stuff, and I can't see a single thing that has improved in our country as a result of Brexit, and I have a very, very, very long list of things that have got worse.

And it's a really interesting question, isn't it? Because I guess part of the problem, which should have been obvious in advance, is that the complete mismatch between the extreme fantasies of the Brexiteers, which anyway, were very different. So some of them wanted Singapore on Thames. Some of them, like Dominic Cummings, wanted sort of 1950s Eisenhower's America completely mismatched with the nature of British society and culture. So it's theoretically true that if Jacob Wiesmog had got his way or Liz Truss had got her way, she was originally a Remain voter, but in her new version of a Brexiteer, you could imagine leaving the European Union, cutting taxes, cutting government spending, cutting regulation, creating a kind of real sort of American style Texan, screw the environment,

pump the oil, send the children up the chimneys, not quite. But basically, let's go for capitalism, red in tooth and claw. But what happened is that they realized once they'd won is that the population was not up for that. So the only way they could have really made Brexite do what they fantasized about, which was generating this crazy growth, is by living in Texas, not living in Britain. And actually, we have a population that even if they voted Brexite, was broadly speaking, comfortable with the welfare state, the NHS, wanted more security, not less. They were not actually voting for a kind of radical, free market, iron round fantasy. Because in all the promises that were made, if you think about the central promise that was on the side of the bus, it was nothing to do with sovereignty. It was about the National Health Service. I mean, Cummings is very open about this, is that they had to find a kind of conventional domestic rationale for taking a massive decision that was going to change virtually everything about the way that we were governed. When they finally find a Brexiteer to sit on the panel, it would be hilarious if they had to cancel the whole thing. They had to get the audience to sit on the panel, baby. You'll get my friend Isabella Oaks shot, guaranteed.

Oh, please, honestly, honestly, these people. But if you were them, and they said, tell me one good thing that Brexite has delivered, what would you say?

What they will say is, it's too early to tell, which is the famous line which the great Chinese foreign minister said about the French Revolution, too early to tell. And they would say that it's all about sovereignty, that they knew that there was going to be negative economic consequences, but they don't care, because they don't mind being poor but free.

Right, I will have to hand all the statements from all of them, where they say the opposite of that.

And then the one thing they do say, the one thing they do say is that they did the vaccine roller, but the woman who was in charge of the whole thing says that's complete nonsense.

And by the way, looking at this COVID inquiry, I see David Cameron's there getting quite a good grilling on austerity today, excellent. But the one thing that I do think this COVID inquiry is going to suggest our record is really quite poor on the whole thing.

So one thing I think that may be worth asking is why it is when on the surface, the polls show, 47% rejoin, 34% stay out, 18% neither, that no major party is prepared to back rejoining.

And it turns out that the strength of the opinion of the rejoin audience seems to be weaker than you'd think. I've just been looking at your favorite or our favorite JLA partners again,

who did something for the Tony Blair Institute. And the figures are really interesting and worth looking at. So if you break down the 43% odd that seemed to be in favor of sort of remain,

it actually breaks down to about 23% wanting the UK to be back inside the EU, 11% outside EU political institutions, but within the single market, 17% outside the European single market, but with a closer trade and security partnership than today. So it's a funny mixture, but overwhelmingly, then 19% in a new kind of association with the EU,

unlike anything we know today, the one thing that's very clear from these polls, and we can share them

with listeners, is an absolute dissatisfaction with the current Brexit deal. And I think that's very, very rich vein for Kirsten or anyone to exploit to say, we could be doing so much better on this relationship with the European Union. And I bet you'll get the majority of the crowd and clacks and applauding if you say that. What if I say what, no, I'm going to give me a clap, give me a clap line and I'll try it. Say, listen, whatever you think about Brexit,

there is no doubt that actually we could have a much smarter relationship with the EU than we have now. Why did you say EU like it was a rat? Just trying to get pumped up for clack. I think, listen, I'm usually quite good at generating clap lines at question time. I've very good record, but I think clack could be quite a tough gig. There was a very, there was a very interesting piece though in the Sunday Times yesterday, Joss Clancy, one of their sort of feature writer, reporter types, went to Clackton and spent a lot of time just talking to people. And his sense was hardly anybody thinking it's going well. A mixture of blame, government, labour, remoners, Europe, but a real sense of, as you said, right at the start, betrayal, let down, and the place just not getting better. That's the point that people want to, you know, people want to feel their communities getting better. I was just thinking a little bit about memories of Brexit and the way in which we were both on different sides on this. So you were right in, I mean, very, very important leading role in the, basically the second referendum, People's Vote Remain campaign. And I was trying to argue very, very strongly for a soft Brexit compromise. And I was looking at the figures and it, there was an extraordinary moment that I'd forgotten about, which was on April Fool's Day, 2019, when I got together an amendment for a customs union. And I don't really remember, Theresa May had taken her withdrawal agreements three times through the House of Commons being defeated every time. And I thought, okay, her backstop is basically a customs union. So why don't we re-describe it as a customs union, get the Labour votes on side, get the Conservatives who were in favour of a backstop who 200 of them had just voted for the backstop. And let's take through a customs union. So I got an amendment together. I got Ken Clark to sign it, put his name to it. And I then began whipping for this thing. And when I looked at the numbers, about two hours before the vote, I was just going to make it, it's going to make it by a couple of votes. And then things began getting really weird. I'd lose two votes here, I'd gain two votes there, totally to my horror. There were seven Conservative Remainers who totally refused to vote for a customs union because they still believed that if they stopped every deal, they'd be able to stay in the EU. So was that people, was that people like Anna Subri and Dominic Grieve? Anna Subri wouldn't vote with me. Sam Gema wouldn't vote with me. One of them I think I got to abstain, but basically in the end, there was this horrible situation where Arch Remainers were walking into the lobbies to vote against me with the extreme Brexiteers. They'd both combined to try to kill the customs union. And in the end, it came down to one vote. And I remember standing outside the lobby talking to one friend who had agreed, I thought, to vote for the customs union and begging saying, get in there and vote for it. This is our last chance to stop a hard Brexit. And him saying to me, no, don't worry, Rory, there'll be many more chances for a soft Brexit. And I was saying, that won't, this is it. This is the last one. And then to my horror, he walked into the lobby and voted against me. And the other person I was counting on, who was a minister, claimed to have fallen asleep in the library. And in the end, I just lost by those two people. The one person who voted against me, that friend, and the guy that fell asleep in the library. Who was the friend and who was the who was the sleepy? The friend was Tom Tugghenart. And the man asleep in the library was George Freeman. And if I had got those two votes, I would have got the customs union amendment through. Now, I don't know what Theresa May would have been able to do with that, whether we would have been

able

to use the parliamentary vote to drive it through or not. That would have been just the beginning of the campaign. But I would have been, we would have got for the first time, a majority in parliament

for something, which is what everybody had been able to do.

My memories of that whole period, I do vaguely remember the April force thing. I kept being invited into Sky News to comment on all these votes as they were happening. And I think on that occasion, I was with that friend of Johnson and his wife, Henry Newman. And I can remember the psychology at that time in the sort of, and I was seeing a lot of people like Anna Subri and Dominic Greven while you, I think the psychology was that because things felt like they were moving our way, certainly with the public, and also parliamentary opinion was growing for the people's vote campaign, I think we did genuinely think that we could get the whole way. And therefore that made us less interested in possible compromises. And look, I'll be honest, I mean, if you could have got away with a softer Brexit and not ended with a total disaster that we've got now, we would, we would, I agree, we'd all have been better off. But in a way, I do think the next generation will undo this whole thing or try to find a way to undo this whole thing.

I really do. Okay, well, here we are, maybe time for a break.

This week's episode of the Restless Politics is sponsored by the new European, one of the few good things that came out of Brexit seven years ago. And it's what I like to call a real newspaper because it's full of brilliant original writing and some amazing photography. And yet again, may I say, I had the front cover this week with a piece fantastically damning about Boris Johnson and his political obituary with the headline, Never Again, and a big red cross through his face. It's not just politics, is it, Alison? And I think one of the reasons that I quite nerdlly, like the new European, is we've talked a bit about its cultural pages. There's also a wonderful weekly philosophy column by a philosopher called Nigel Warburton. So he's just written a great piece this week, for example, about the American philosopher Cornel West running for president, which connects analytical philosophy, critical theory and politics.

I know. He also, he reaches the conclusion, and I think he's right. The person who will be most worried about anybody running as a third candidate is Biden, because I suspect an American philosopher

is unlikely to be pro-Trump and Cornel West certainly isn't. Anyway, I'm very, very pleased to say that the new European is one of the fastest growing newspapers in Europe right now. And here is your chance to do something positive about the sorry state of politics and media in the UK, which together have taken this country downwards. Become a new European subscriber. For just one pound a week, you get full access to their website, including the entire seven-year archive of content. And if like me, you like getting the actual newspaper delivered, you can have that for just an extra one pound a week. These are the very best rates available. And as a special introductory offer for the rest of his policies listeners, they'll give you either a t-shirt. Oh, who doesn't want a t-shirt? Or one of their very popular bollocks to Brexit passport covers worth 25 pounds. Absolutely free when you sign up today. So that's your choice. Don't delay. Visit www.theneuEuropean.co.uk forward slash trip.

That's www.theneuEuropean.co.uk forward slash t-r-i-p.

Well, welcome back to the Rest is Politics with me, Rory Stewart.

And me, Alistair Campbell.

And I hope everybody has had a chance to listen to at least the first part of our interview with John Major. Now, of course, if you want to hear episode two right now, it's already available to members of the Rest is Politics Plus. Just go to therestispolitics.com to sign up.

And it's a great benefit. It allows you to get these double interviews immediately rather than having to wait for next week. If you're an iPhone user, then we've got some good news there too. We've just launched the Rest is Politics Plus on Apple podcasts and we've included a trial option. Just click try free on the Rest is Politics Show page on Apple podcasts to start your one month free trial today. And here, John Major part two.

Now, John Major, it was, we had a lot of time with John Major and we essentially, we split them into two. First part was his life and times up to becoming Prime Minister and then Prime Minister. But even with all the time we had, we didn't actually cover Brexit.

He mentioned at one point that he felt that the British government wasn't handling China properly. And I'd love to go back to him and find out more deeply what he meant about that.

But should we talk about China for a bit? Because I think one of the most important stories this week has been Anthony Blinken, the American Secretary of State, his visit to Beijing. I've been involved in a few bilateral visits to China and the Chinese coming to us. My experience of them is that everything is planned to the last minute.

So do you buy the idea that they just sort of decided, you know, let's see how it goes and then we'll wheel him in to see the president or do you think it was planned?

I think they were expecting that he was going to see the president unless he said something so horrifying to them that they were going to have to cancel that the last moment.

But they are very, very much about using protocol as ways of dealing with people. A friend of mine called Nick Burns is the US ambassador to China at the moment. And I don't think he would mind my

saying that it's been pretty tough. The Chinese have been very reluctant to grant senior access.

He's had a pretty rough ride over the last few years because China is clearly very, very, if you put it one word, prickly, other word, understandably angry about the fact that they feel the US is really lining up for a new Cold War and that they have become public enemy number one in Washington. And they're very keen to try to turn that narrative around.

But they're also, they also flex their muscles a lot more, don't they? You feel their strength.

I think we saw this in, we see it, what we see a lot in Africa. We talked about it last week in relation to Latin America where the old style diplomacy of stealth and discretion seems to have been replaced by something much more robust. And I'm fascinated by this guy. Blinken went to see first of all the foreign minister, Kingang. But then he had a meeting with Wang Yi, who I think is a much more interesting character. And this is a guy who's former, he's a former foreign minister, but he's now, I don't quite know how the structures work, but he's essentially he's described as their top diplomat because he's the communist party, foreign affairs kind of main guy. But he is, he is much more the kind of diplomat that we would be used to in that he's, he can do the subtle diplomacy. I remember in particular, I think it was an Australian foreign minister when he had, you know, when they had in the cameras for the bit at the start where they all smile and sip tea and it's all very, very gentle and very jolly. And he absolutely laid into the Australians over something. And the ambassador, the Australian ambassador went over to the,

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to his foreign minister and whispered and said, you can't just take that, you've got a category gauge. So the media absolutely loved this. It was the sort of stuff you see behind closed doors, but it was in front of the, of the media. And that was, that was Wang Yi just being very, very strong, very robust, very clear, because Blink and I thought came across as he looked, I thought he looked quite very, very serious, very, very sober, really quite nervous when he arrived. But what happens with these visits is you get all the protocol, you get all the formality, and then bit by bit over time, you get a sense of what actually was said and what actually happened. Yeah. Well, I mean, I think that the fundamental thing to go back to is that the United States decided about probably the mid-2000s, but really from Obama onwards, that China represented the largest growing strategic threat to the United States. And the story was very quick. So China joins the World Trade Organization 2001. It becomes larger than the French economy, 2005, larger than the British economy, 2006, larger than the German economy, 2007, larger than the Japanese economy, 2008. And Obama comes in and he really focuses on what he calls the tilt towards Asia Pacific. And really that means the tilt towards China. And this is created because particularly from 2012 onwards, which is when Xi Jinping comes in, you get yourself into a situation in which China is beginning to do more aggressive naval exercises, beginning to claim that straits of international water actually belong to China, begin to occupy disputed islands and the straits, so taking on the Philippines, challenging Japan, and to the fury of President Obama lying directly to him. So he negotiates this standoff where he manages to get, he thinks China and the other party to agree to withdraw from this island. And of course, the Chinese don't withdraw and end up just building permanent features on this island to claim it. So out of all of this comes this idea that China has the capacity to be the major adversary to the United States. And that's one of the reasons why if you look at the British defense strategy, if you look at US spending, they were so quick to want to get out of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. They thought those were yesterday's conflicts. They shouldn't have big presences there. They should be thinking about Pacific. And maybe the most dramatic example of this was getting this submarine agreement going with Australia, which really made the French angry, but giving the Australians nuclear submarines with the support of Britain and the United States. And all of this, including putting more American troops into the Philippines, beefing up Japan's spend on defense going up to 2%. So Japan, as I said, is going on course to have the second largest military in the world by spend. All of this stuff is about trying to reassure Americans allies in the Pacific that they're going to have some protection against China. Now, the question I guess over to you is, is it too late? Is China basically too big? Did America start too late on this? And actually, it's no longer possible to contain China. Is that a gas? Is that a gas? Yeah, it's my gas cylinder. Yeah, it's the fuel truck, the musical gas truck. Yeah. I do think psychologically, one of the biggest things that has happened in the world recently is this sense that the American feeling that they are the most powerful country in the world, which they've enjoyed for most of the life that we can remember, that that is no longer a given. And I think that explains in part why there was this attempt to build better relations. And the guy, you talked about the pivot, the pivot to Asia, and there's actually a very, very good book of that name. It's called The Pivot by my namesake, no relation, Kurt Campbell, who's a big cheese in American foreign policy. And he's currently, I think his job at

the moment is the main coordinator of Indo-Pacific affairs for President Biden. And he, I think, is the guy who was doing the pre-briefing for the media on this trip. So he's somebody really, really worth listening to. The pivot, he explains in the book, but what's happening now, I think, is the feeling that things have gone very, very badly wrong and they've got to get them on a better keel. I think with some of the, you mentioned some of these kind of military situations that these incursions that have sometimes been going wrong. If you remember, the reason that Blinken's visit was delayed was because of the Chinese balloon that was spotted in Montana and the Americans shot it down. And so Kurt Campbell's basic line is that there are these disagreements, they're real, they're dividing them, but there are so many global priorities that America and China have to work on together. So they have got to get relations on a better keel. And is it too late for that? I don't think it is. There's also a massive economic interest in this. And again, on both sides, because the Chinese economy is not in as great shape as they would like it to be. They've got big problems with youth unemployment. We've talked before about their housing crisis. And of course, if you set off some kind of trade war between the two biggest economies in the world, then that is going to hurt everybody. It's going to hurt them more than most. Well, so just to develop that, I mean, the statistics are completely staggering. So China's second largest economy in the world, largest now in purchasing power parity. Quickly on PPP, I'm being challenged by the producers. Purchasing power parity basically means taking into account what you can buy with your money. And dollars are a bit misleading. So in dollars terms, China looks like it's the second largest economy in the world. But that's a lot dependent on currency exchange. But if you look at what you can buy with your money, China has been the largest economy in the world for some time. Largest exporter in the world, second largest importer in the world. And China is on track to have a middle class, sort of upper middle class, with a purchasing power equivalent to the Europe and the US, with a larger population of an upper middle class buying group than the US and the EU by 2030. And this means that so many bits, I mean, we think a lot about the things that we import from China. So textiles, manufacturing, consumer electronics. But it's also the other way around. So many British, European, American companies are dependent on exporting to China because, of course, there are over a billion increasingly wealthy customers there. There's a huge chunk. I mean, China alone accounts for maybe 16, 17% of global imports and exports. You remove that from the world system. I mean, it's beyond the matching. And in certain areas, China has an almost death group on the world. I mean, China is the fastest growing place in the world in a 40% growth in electric vehicles, credible growth in electric vehicles. And it's producing something like 90% of the world's wind turbines, 80% of the world's solar panels. So we've talked in the past about Taiwan producing 50% of the world's semiconductors, 90% of the world's advanced semiconductors. But there are so many other things. And that's why I think the European Union has moved away from this phrase of decoupling, which was this idea that you could somehow create an economy completely separate from China, towards this idea of de-risking, which I think is both about a little bit of resilience, but it's also about trying to reduce the chance of a confrontation. Yeah, there was a piece on the Asia business correspondent at the BBC, Surinjana Tiwari, had a very, very interesting piece suggesting actually that in this war, war or struggle or race to dominate the chip market globally, that America

actually is nosing ahead. And that there is another reason why China wants to improve relations, because ultimately for them, they have got to get their economy back on track. And I don't think President Xi would have seen Blinken without him. That was, I think, their way of signaling that this visit really, really mattered. And that they are saying, we do want to get things back on and even kill. We're recording this as Blinken is still there, but it'll be very interesting to see how both sides project the visit once it's over. My sense is, I think the mood music thus far has been pretty positive. Well, finally, maybe just before we move off China, if people are really geekily interested in what Chinese policy really is towards the world. Xi Jinping in the 20th National Party Congress, so that was October last year, laid out a pretty clear statement of what he sees China's strategic objectives to be. And oddly, China in some ways is a very secretive state, but in another way can't afford to be because it's dependent on 93 million Communist Party members

who they have to keep communicating with. And if you want to really find out what the leadership thinks, look at their communication to those party members. And some things are clear in that. One is

China clearly wants to be self-sufficient in technology, get ahead in AI and quantum, be self-sufficient in food. He talks a lot about Taiwan, how Taiwan is part of China. But he also talks about a country run by big powers. And that's basically a way of saying China rejects the idea of a world being run by the United States. He thinks that the US should see itself as one of a number of big powers of which China would be one. And that those are the countries that are going to matter in the world and they're going to have to cooperate together. Yeah, yeah. Taiwan does seem to come up a fair amount. And I suspect they'll both have just stuck to the kind of very traditional speaking lines. But I think that is the thing that is maybe making the Americans more, not less concerned is this feeling that there's, we've talked before about the sense of sort of self-fulfilling prophecy that there's so much talk of military action in Taiwan that therefore eventually it will happen. So again, whether part of the purpose of the visit is to try to try to sort of calm that down. Interestingly, Blinken, you know, this is simply a restatement of policy, but him sort of making a point of saying in his press conference that the Americans do not support Taiwan's independence and do not wish to change his status quo. Also, fairly sort of virtual and human rights, I would say, probably not nearly as voluble as some would have liked. While we're here, Rory, and talking about China, you remember when I did an interview with Rahim Mahmoud, the leader of the Uighur community in the UK. From Xinjiang, talking about the concentration camps in the U.K.

Exactly. And she sent me a rather moving and sad email because you remember, she's talked about how she'd had no connection with her family at all. She told that chilling story about when she phoned, she finally got through to her brother and said, and he just basically said, look, you know, if you love us, you won't phone us and put the phone down. And she, anyway, she's since received news that her eldest sister, Raheela, died in March. And Raheema is a very, very good musician. And she's asked us to advertise for her two concerts, one on the June the 27th and another on July the 14th. The one on July the 14th is for her sister, in memory of her sister. So we will put those into the show notes. But that was a very, very sad missive from Raheema, that the sister that she's not spoken to or seen for a long time passed away. I'm really, really sorry to hear that. Really, really sorry to hear that.

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Well, I think that the last thing we were going to touch on, which she suggested, which I think is a great subject, is Russia in Africa.

Or Africans in Russia.

Or Africans in Russia. So people want more details. One of the things I've been reading this week is again, this great newsletter by a guy called Joshua Knot, who last week put out a fantastic summary of Russia in Africa with incredible graphs. So showing, for example, just how many arms Russia's

selling into Africa, Russia's kind of producing two or three times the number of arms sales that any other country. The activities, the Wagner group that we've talked about, Mali Central African Republic Sudan, the way that Russia has been deliberately benefiting from stolen illegal gold from Sudan to shore up its effort, the way in which it's strong armed South Africa into line. And in fact, a Russian warship has just turned up on the South African coast this week, which has been a real indication of that close cooperation. And the way finally, just before I hand back to you, that many, many of the countries that abstained about the Russian Ukraine war were Africans. Some of them, you know, big, big economies, Angola, South Africa. Some of them anglophone countries that you would have expected to be in the past, maybe on the US British side on this, Uganda, Tanzania. And some of them countries which are just now proxies for the Wagner group and Russian military action, Central African Republic, Mali Sudan. Anyway, over to you. Well, you know, I've talked before about Jacob Riesmog's dad, William Riesmog,

and the book he wrote, The Sovereign Individual. I remember part of it, which I remember thinking at the time, this is a bit far fetched, but he had this whole thing about how wars in the end would be fought less by nation states than by private, effectively private sectoral mercenary organizations. And it is incredible how often the Wagner group keep popping up in these situations. You say in Mali, they're right at the heart of it. But I thought this was the visit by these six African leaders to Ukraine and then to Russia to see President Zelensky and then Putin was really interesting. And if you go back to our previous discussion, when you were talking about how the Chinese vision of the world is that there will become more big players. And in a sense, you've got the Africans there making a pitch to be, this is a role that the Erdogan, I think, was trying to play at a certain point, but essentially they were inserting themselves into this war, giving the reasons why they were so concerned, a lot of which was to do with the grain issue that you mentioned. But if you think about it, it's quite a big deal that six African presidents have got together and have gone to these countries and essentially said to both sides, you guys are going to end this war. And if there's anything that we can do to help you get there, then we're here to do it. Zelensky was very, very clear that he's not going to negotiate with Putin until Putin, as it were, gets off his land. And also it was very, very, it was quite cleverly put together. So if you think of the, you know, the group together, so you had representatives from South Africa and Uganda, and they, I think, are probably seen as more pro-Russian, yeah, pretty much pro-Russian. Yeah, you then had Zambia and the Comoros who are

much more aligned with the West. And you had Egypt, Senegal and Congo, Brazzaville, who are, you know, I think would be described as somewhere between the two. So it wasn't as if they went with a, with a view. They went with an understanding that there are different views. And that led

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Putin

almost to, to co-op them as being supporters of the, quote, special military operation. He was able to point to the ones who had not supported the United Nations resolutions condemning the attack.

He was able to do his kind of, his divide and rule. But they were clever and quite an important visit. There was one, another fascinating moment where they were essentially, they were pressing very, very hard on issues that to do with prisoners that really sub-prisoners of war and also of children. And you could see Putin getting very, very defensive, because of course one of the reasons that he's up before the war crimes tribunal is because of this, essentially the kidnapping of Ukrainian children. And he went straight into this sort of defensive posture and then said that, you know, he was basically, they were, they were, they were protecting the children. It's fascinating. Also, I mean, one of the things which is going on is that the Russians have been trying to whip up anti-imperialist rhetoric. They're trying to get sympathy. I mean, it's kind of ironic, given that they are basically invaded and occupied another country, that their whole sales pitch in Africa is we were never a colonizing power. We were on your side. We backed Patrice Lumumba and all these people through the Cold War. We were on the side of the liberation movements. We backed the ANC. You've got the president of Uganda saying

the Russians have been with us for a hundred years. How can we criticize them?

But I'd also like to pay tribute to the Kenyans. So Martin Kamani, who's the Kenyan ambassador at the UN, made a passionate, barnstorming speech attacking Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN, which anybody who wants to watch an African diplomat on fire, watch Martin Kamani's speech, and shows that some African countries have been completely unapologetic about calling out the horror of this because they feel so strongly that their borders are artificial, that places like the DRC have been torn apart by different countries invading. In fact, many, many other African countries have suffered different forms of proxy war and invasion over the years, and that they need to be clear that it is not acceptable to break borders and invade another country and try to occupy it. Yeah. I mean, the Russian official line was dismisses the wrong word. I think perhaps one mistake they made was to take too much into the meetings. They listed these 10 principles, de-escalation, recognition of sovereignty, security guarantees, the grain issue, prisoners of war, children. And the thing I think you've got to recognize with Putin is he will take the bits that suit his narrative and reject the bits that don't. And so their official line was Peskov, who I know a little bit, but he was my opposite number and he's still doing the same job now. And he just, he said, any initiative like this is very difficult to implement. But President Putin has shown interest in considering it. And then the last thing that they did, of course, was to say that it's very difficult to get any sort of agreement going because they'd been to see Zelensky beforehand and Zelensky had been essentially, etc. You can't deal with this guy. This is something a lot of people here in Jordan have been talking about. I mean, seen from here, they see it very much. I think this is something we talked about with Fiona Hill, that it feels like the Iran-Iraq war feels to people here as though this is a war that's going to go on forever. And they feel that the major players have no incentive in ending it, that unfortunately, in the end, it's costing horrible, unspeakable kind of loss of life to

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Ukrainians and Russians, civilians and soldiers on the front line, but that many of the major global powers are not actually shedding blood on the ground. And in some ways, they don't have a direct incentive to end this war. And that's one of the reasons I think that many people, particularly in the Global South, are desperately trying to get involved in finding some kind of solution. But finding that solution is almost impossible. I mean, I think even if Putin is driven back by the Ukrainian counteroffensive, it doesn't end. At the moment, it would feel as though

the Russians would just bide their time and try to come back in again. I mean, it's horrifying. They also, the counteroffensive presumably has been made much more difficult because of this wretched dam attack, which, and it does now seem, of course, that it was the Russians, it was a single explosive thing that they timed and it would not have been done by Ukraine. I wish people would stop sort of doing on the one hand on the other hand about that one. But it's very hard to find out what's going on. And the other thing that was a, there's been some very interesting, very old fashioned propaganda exercises being run inside Ukraine, pretty a bit like, you know, the stuff during the Second World War and the Blitz about, you know, walls have ears

and you never know who's listening. You know, they are desperately trying to keep the details of the counteroffensive quiet. So what you're hearing is both sides claiming that it's going well for them, but very hard to know. Well, we hear a little plug for our sister pod, Battleground Ukraine, if you want the real granular day-to-day information on what's going on on the ground.

And I think Alistair, a little bit of encouragement for both of us, maybe to towards the end of the year, if we can do so in a way that doesn't completely disrupt people's lives, visit Ukraine and maybe see if we can get some interviews on the ground. That'd be great. That'd be very good. Maybe a final lighter point on which to end. I went to see the new spitting image show and President Xi features in that. He's just sort of sitting in a royal box watching it all.

It doesn't say very much. He's just watching.

That's well observed. I like that. Anyway. Right. On that, Alistair, thank you very much.

I'll see you soon. See you soon. Bye-bye.