

Speaking of Research

Series 2 - Max Dixon

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SPEAKERS

Catherine McDonald, Max Dixon

Catherine McDonald 00:04

Hello and Welcome to Speaking of Research a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on research that addresses global challenges. We'll be in conversation with doctoral researchers about their research, which global challenges they hope to inform, and how they hope their work will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Max Dixon from the University of Portsmouth, whose research looks at how foreign policy discourse intersects with the economy. Max, can you start by telling us a bit more about that?

Max Dixon 00:44

Yeah, of course. So, what I'm looking at is Taiwan, and particular how foreign policy, how Taiwan sits in British foreign policy. Now, in 2021, in May 2021 The Economist referred to Taiwan as the most dangerous place on earth. Now, of course, this was before various other foreign policy issues raise their head, but effectively, it shows us, in my opinion, that Taiwan is increasingly seen as a growing concern for foreign policy makers in the United Kingdom, but also, really throughout the world. And that is ultimately because Taiwan has a number of very key specialisms, in particular microchips. So, these very small chips that are fundamental to many technologies that we use. So, the vast majority of phones that people will use will have a chip made by a company in Taiwan called TSMC, but also in things like electric vehicles and other kind of key kind of green technologies. AI is another big one. All of them rely on these chips from Taiwan. And effectively, Taiwan built up this specialism in microchips in the 1980s and the 1990s to the point where, effectively, Taiwan is fundamental to many, many global supply chains. And what I really want to understand is, do policymakers respect that difficulty? Do they factor that in when it comes to building a foreign policy response to potential escalation in cross Strait region in across the Taiwan Strait between China and Taiwan. And

how really does language play a role in many ways, securitizing Taiwan its and its supply chains.

Catherine McDonald 02:11

So the global challenge that you're addressing in your research is based around supply chains?

Max Dixon 02:16

So I'm ultimately looking at the foreign policy challenge more broadly in Taiwan. But a key part of that has come out of my research looking at the discourse used to Taiwan, is the focus on supply chain. So, recognising that Taiwan matters, not merely because it is a democracy, a liberal democracy, but also because it has something that many economies around the world rely on. And I think this came really into sharp relief for many during the Covid19 pandemic, when, for non-security reasons, for health reasons, we saw a disruption of these supply chains, and this in combination with a kind of deteriorating global security environment, most acutely for Taiwan seen following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also in particular for Taiwan, particularly in the United Kingdom, following what happened in Hong Kong in 2019, we've seen British parliamentarians kind of bring together this economic concern, the economic stability that a an escalation between China and Taiwan might entail, but also mix that in with a what I would argue is a kind of post-colonial, or colonial, the lingering colonial kind of commitment Britain feels that it has where the failure to protect democracy in Hong Kong kind of conflated with the protection of democracy in Taiwan. So I think there's these really interesting connections being made between economic and kind of political security, I suppose you'd call it, and that's really the global challenge that I'm trying to understand. I'm trying to understand how do policy makers recognise and build those arguments, because ultimately, when it comes to building foreign policy, especially for the United Kingdom, you know, Taiwan's 4000 miles away, so to to sell British involvement in a conflict or coming to the defence of Taiwan, requires some ingenuity, I suppose, from British parliamentarians, British foreign policy makers. And I'm interested in how that is constructed and how particular supply chains are securitised within those discussions. So that really nicely, actually leads me on to my second question, which is to sort of drill down a bit in what you're specifically hoping to inform or change in relation to that global challenge. Yeah, so effectively, what I want to understand is, and particularly I think it's important because it will help those that are really, really invested in the way that the UK might respond to an escalation. So, what I want to understand is how discursive constructions enable certain policy avenues. So, in essence, how do parliamentarians talk about Taiwan, and if they talk about Taiwan and its security as part of British security. So say, for instance, arguing that a Chinese blockade of Taiwan would have detrimental effects on the economic security of British citizens in the United Kingdom, and then that will enable certain policy actions and make the defence of Taiwan for the United Kingdom seem as absolutely quintessential to the United Kingdom's security and stability. So, I think

that kind of development was something that we saw throughout the Ukraine conflict. So ongoing Ukraine conflict, so for instance, and that had, as many people remember, and continues to have massive impact on prices in the United Kingdom. And that is seen, and was seen, I suppose, by parliamentarians, as something that had to be recognised. They had to recognise that in supporting Ukraine, it came with particular costs for the British people. And I think what I'm really, really interested to understand, and what I think might be interesting for business leaders or people that are very reliant on supply chains and that are closely connected to Taiwan, but also if they have say, for instance, supply chains in China, if they have one supplier in China that is their fundamental supplier, how they might understand whether or not the United Kingdom would decide to sanction Chinese companies and make that supply chain not worthwhile, right? Make it impossible to maintain. What am I trying to understand is the discursive constructions that will enable those decisions and recognise that they're not something that just happens overnight, that these decisions kind of rely on interpretive dispositions, these kind of dominant discursive constructions that enable people to understand how we get to that point. They don't suddenly happen. They tap into kind of long-standing traditions and long standing conceptions of particular issues.

Catherine McDonald 06:21

And have you got anything to tell us about what your research has uncovered so far, or what you've discover?

Max Dixon 06:26

Yeah, so the key one and the key two, I would say, is the impact of Covid19 pandemic in people recognising that actually we're very, very reliant on very particular places such as Taiwan. And then this brings into security and foreign policy, these key goals that we must kind of protect. So for instance, they recognise that we can't simply just rely on a free and open world economy. But actually, there are choke points, and that requires some commitments that maybe otherwise British foreign policy makers would have thought weren't necessarily vital. So, for instance, we've seen lots of discussion about defence spending going up and shifting away the way that the UK spends its money internationally, away from foreign aid towards defence spending. I would argue that this is ultimately the response to a recognition that actually, you need to defend these routes. You need to defend what in particular they refer to in the Indo-Pacific, as a free and open Indo-Pacific, and so recognising that you have to be able to freely move around, and that is something that you defend with the Royal Navy. So, we've seen, for instance, since 2021 the Royal Navy go on two large expeditions to the Indo-Pacific that is an uptick that, I would argue, is the direct response to concerns about things like supply chains and things about stability and how that has an impact on the United Kingdom's economic health. The other thing is the mixture between that and what I would argue is the kind of traditional concern in foreign policy, which is a focus on defending democracy and defending what the United Kingdom would refer to in Taiwan is kind of a like-minded country, a

country that is democracy, open trading democracy. So particularly after Hong Kong, that was the other uptick that I saw, that I noticed that the United Kingdom recognised that it had not gone far enough in defending Hong Kong, and therefore many parliamentarians sought to kind of tie that towards Taiwan and defending Taiwan's democracy. So, the kind of conflation of those two things, the confluence of those two things, has been a really, kind of interesting development that I've noticed throughout my research.

Catherine McDonald 08:22

Max this feels like such timely research, I wish you all the best with it.

Max Dixon 08:27

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

Catherine McDonald 08:29

My thanks to Max Dixon, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.