China’s College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), A PRC “Spy base” in Cuba, and Blinken to Beijing

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TRANSCRIPT

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Miles Yu:

Welcome to China Insider, a podcast from Hudson Institute's China Center.

Shane Leary:

It's Tuesday, June 13th. I'm Shane Leary and I'm sitting down with Miles Yu, Senior Fellow and Director of the China Center here at the Hudson Institute, and we have three topics for today. The first is the reopening of the National College Entrance examination, commonly known as the Gaokao with a record 13 million students taking the exam for the first time since the zero Covid lockdowns. The second is the controversy surrounding the revelation of a Chinese spy base operating out of Cuba. And the third is the long-awaited trip to Beijing by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, which comes at a time of high tension between the US and PRC. Miles, how are you?

Miles Yu:

Very good, Shane.

Shane Leary:

Good, good. For our first topic today, the National College Entrance examination, commonly known as the Gaokao, is the Gaokao is starting back up again for the first time since zero Covid. This test started in 1952, but really came into its current form under Deng Xiaoping when it was nationally standardized in 1978. This year, a record 13 million students are taking the test as it opens up for the first time in years. And at first glance, Americans, we might think of this like we do the SATs, but it appears much more extreme than this. I'll just quote one student from an article in Al Jazeera saying, “I've been waking up at 4:00 AM every day, except on Sundays, to study for the past four years.” So, it sounds like maybe a little bit higher stakes than what we're used to. How should we understand the Gaokao?

Miles Yu:

First of all, Deng Xiaoping normalized this system in 1977. Gaokao is a very uniquely Chinese institution that basically gives the ordinary Chinese family a sort of hope that there are some kind of social mobility opportunities. To be fair, this is one of the few institutions in the Chinese society that were perceived as relatively fair: everybody has a chance. However, precisely because of that, the pressure for children to perform is enormous. It's basically a one-time deal. You took the examination, you took a Gaokao, and then the rest of your life is pretty much determined on the score. So, the stake is very high. That's why Gaokao is a make it or break it moment for a lot of young kids. Precisely because of that, each year a lot of people are looking at this as the only “golden ticket” to a good life. This year is particularly important because, as you mentioned, last year was canceled on account of Covid. So, this year, you have the largest number of people taking it. The test last for two days. This year there’s about 13 million people taking this whole thing. The most revealing moment would come at the moment when the scores were revealed. Normally they posted it on a big wall, the score. So, it's a very unique and a very important event in Chinese daily life.

Shane Leary:
Let me just ask you: something like this, this sort of extreme testing, is this uniquely characteristic of communist regimes and the CCP? Or is this something that goes back further that's peculiar to Chinese civilization?

**Miles Yu:**

It's a combination of both traditional legacy and the Chinese communist regime. China, you know, for over a thousand years had this very important civil service examination, it's called the Imperial Examination. In China, it's called *Ke ju*. Now that was banned in the early 20th century. But the sort of institutional memory, the format is still there. It's very similar to that. However, the content of the examination of Gaokao is very different. Basically you have two major orientations. One is for liberal arts, another one is for natural sciences. Either way, you would have to pass a lot of politically motivated content. For example, this year there are questions that reflect Xi Jinping Thought, and there were two sentences uttered by Xi Jinping that were basically digs at the United States of being hegemonic and a unipolar power. So, Xi Jinping said this, and so the test ask them to compose an essay based upon what Xi Jinping said.

So, this is basically indoctrination. The Party has to control this sort of things as important as Gaokao. And many of the high schoolers regard the Gaokao as the way to enter into top Chinese universities. From there, they will go study abroad, mostly to the United States. And this year is very unique because so many Chinese universities are basically R&D bases for the Chinese military and security apparatus. So, they are sanctioned by the US government and it's very hard to, for Chinese students, to get a visa from this university to come to the United States. So, there's been a lot of warnings on Chinese cyberspace telling, “Hey, listen, do not apply for these universities that were sanctioned by the United States.” So, I mean this university's enrollment, you will see a major drop because of the political situation there. I took the Gaokao myself in 1979.

**Shane Leary:**

So yeah, I wanted to ask.

**Miles Yu:**

In the US systems, the Class of 1983, that was a third year after the romanization, and at the time they acceptance, the admissions rate, was a very low, it was about 5%. So, I was considered very lucky at the time. Now, right now, most of the people who took Gaokao will get into a Chinese university, but most of the universities are no good. So, what we're talking about, it is a fierce competition for the top layer of Chinese university that has direct funding. And so, we're talking about no fewer than 100 Chinese universities. So, when we talk about education, particularly higher education in China, the Chinese Communist Party, yes, they treat it very seriously, but far less seriously than what the Chinese Communist Party's own school, they're called the “party schools,” *dang xiao*. There are about 4,000 Chinese colleges and universities in China, but the “party school” with which the Chinese Communist party indoctrinates, trains its own cadres, will double that number. So, it's about like 9,000, 10,000 “party schools” at different layers. That shows where the Chinese Communist Party's political priority is.

**Shane Leary:**

Switching gears to our next topic. There's been concern in the news recently regarding a secret base operated by the PRC out of Cuba to spy on Americans. Originally, last Thursday, when the
Wall Street Journal began reporting on this, the White House and the Pentagon stated that the reporting was inaccurate. But they later clarified that, actually, the inaccuracy was that this base was not recently established, but that it’s been operating for some time. So, there’s been quite a bit of backlash on that lack of transparency from congressional members. The leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senators Warner and Rubio released a statement saying “the United States must respond to China’s ongoing and brazen attacks on our nation’s security. We must be clear that it would be unacceptable for China to establish an intelligence facility within a hundred miles of Florida and the United States in an area also populated with key military installations and extensive maritime traffic.” Miles, what do you make of this? What should be our major takeaways from this revelation?

Miles Yu:

I mean the White House was wrong. It says, first off, they deny. And then secondly, it says, oh, it started a list since 2019. The Chinese eavesdropping facility in Cuba went way back. Basically, it became a large-scale enterprise between Cuba and China in the Spring of 2001, right after the EP-3 plane crash incident. It was widely reported, at the time, that the Chinese activities in Cuba included electronic eavesdropping on the United States and also the Chinese government sponsored radio broadcasting from Cuba. It did not really just start in 2019, and I think they said that probably they want to blame it on the inaction by the Trump administration, but I will say it went way back. So, this has been an issue for a long, long time. Now, Cuba occupies a very unique place in Chinese political landscape because the United States has always been designated by the Chinese Communist Party as this ultimate enemy.

It's the number one national security rivalry. Because of that, the CCP is always, always trying to find like-minded partners. So, there were very unique, two unique countries. One is North Korea, another one is Cuba, in this particular regard. That is, North Korea and Cuba are viewed by the Chinese Communist Party as the ultimate enemy of the United States. So, there are Chinese bodies, too. So, if you track history, it's almost a pattern. When a new Chinese communist party leader came, comes to power, the first country that president would visit is North Korea. It's a political statement. So, it's anti-American political statement. So, Cuba actually serves in a unique way because every time there was a major crisis between the United States and China, Cuba is always used as a conduit for the Chinese leader to express anti-American sentiment. The most obvious one was April 2001. After the EP-3 incident, General Secretary Jiang Zemin would not pick up the phone from President George H.W. Bush.

Instead, he flew to Cuba and composed anti-American poems, basically to release his anti-American passive aggressiveness. So, this is Cuba. If you go even further, back in the sixties, Cuba was absolutely used as a frontier battle station against the United States. Che Guevara, which was sponsored by Fidel Castro, went to China. Mao put up the huge “hoopla,” gave him a lot of money and political coverage. Fidel Castro, actually, was the buddy-buddy of the Chinese communist regime for years, years. Now, for a number of years, China countered the Nobel Peace Prize by creating its own peace prize. It's called the Confucius Prize. The first one went to Vladimir Putin, but then after that, the Confucius Price was given to Fidel Castro. So, it's kind of always like a farce there. Now, Fidel Castro reciprocated this Chinese good will, as well. So Fidel Castro probably is the only communist leader that actually paid visit, in person, to the three remaining bodies of the Communist dictators.

That is Vladimir Lenin in Moscow, Ho Chi Minh’s body in Hanoi, and Mao’s body in Tiananmen Square. Those were three remaining communist dictators whose bodies were still preserved. So
Fidel Castro was a fanatic fan of the three. In addition, for decades, the Chinese government’s trend is Spanish language spying and language specialists, not in Spain, not in Argentina, but in Cuba. So that's why every time you see a Chinese Communist Party leader visit Cuba, there's always a large number of Chinese trainees there. Since Spring 2001, the Chinese government and the Cuban government have signed a number of arms transport deals. In other words, the China would send arms to Cuba, in violation of all kinds of laws and rules. And also, China has spent a lot of money modernizing Cuban telecommunication systems. For example, in March 2015, a Chinese government-owned container Costco container ship was caught by the Colombian port authority for secretly shipping large amount of banned arms to Cuba. That would include 99 rockets, 3000 cannon shells, 100 tons of military grade dynamite, 2.6 million detonators. And they’re all made by the Chinese defense giant, Norinco, and they’re all hidden at the bottom of the cargo ship. And those items were not on the cargo list. So, they stopped for replenishment in a Colombian port, and that's when the authorities aborted and uncovered this crime. The captain was promptly arrested. This kind of “hanky panky” between Cuba and China has been going on for a long, long, long time. So, we should pay seriously attention to it.

Shane Leary:

And it seems like as a nation, we're just now waking up to a lot of these pernicious practices by the PRC, especially overseas and so close to us. I mean, we had the recent spy balloon incident in February where it turned out that this was not the first time something like this had happened. We had the crackdowns on CCP overseas police stations operating in New York City and other cities across the globe. And now we have this, which as you've just stated, goes back decades. Are we still only seeing the tip of the iceberg here?

Miles Yu:

I think there are different layers of US government. So, our sort of awareness of what's going on, it depends. I mean, for the most part, you are right, the American populace was sort of sleepy. We're not really seriously, acutely aware of the danger of the Chinese Communist Party poses to the United States. On the other hand, within the US government, you have a lot of people who are keenly aware of the danger of the Chinese Communist Party. So, at some point in the last five or six years, there's two elements of American society, the keenly aware part and the mostly unaware part, sort of converged and created a national consensus. Now it's pretty much like a no dispute that China poses a serious challenge to the United States. The nature of the China challenge, the China threat is different from the Soviet Union where everything is in open, it's clear. The Chinese threat to the United States is much, much more subterranean and much, much more hidden and systemic. So, this is why the China threat and China challenge are so formidable and we have to really mobilize our society to deal with. It cannot, cannot be down piecemeal.

Shane Leary:

Certainly. Well, and this dovetails quite nicely into our third topic. This week, Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, is finally planning to travel to Beijing for his long-awaited visit. This was originally scrapped in February during the spy balloon fiasco. And now, as it's planned to actually occur, it's coming at a time with new tension over this spy base in Cuba, and of course the recent brinkmanship and the Taiwan Strait by the PLAN. So, I just want to ask you, what should we expect out of this trip? It comes out a time when the President has stated he's seeking a “thaw” in US-China relations. Is that a real possibility?
Miles Yu:

Well, it's a possibility, but it's not real. So, what China wants is, China wants the United States to show, quote-unquote, “sincerity,” completely endorse the Chinese Communist Party's agenda so that the Chinese Communist Party will look strong, solid in eyes of the Chinese people who really don't like the party. But most importantly, they want the United States to apologize for worsening the bilateral relationship, in general, and for shooting down the spy balloon, in particular. This is exactly the kind of playbook China used in 2001 after the EP-3 incident, where seeking the US apology was the one and only condition for China to cooperate. So, this is sort of a “test of will.” Mr. Blinken’s goal, I think, is very clear. That is to establish a high-level crisis communications channel, just like the post Cuba missile crisis, when the Soviet Union and the United States realized “it is dangerous to both of us,” so that we established a hotline between the White House and the Kremlin.

But it has been a failure with China ever since the 1999 embassy bombing and the 2001 EP-3 incident. Numerous near collision incidents, of late, the balloon incident, etcetera etcetera, each one of this crisis moment is not followed by China's willing cooperation to deal with this issue front and center and directly. That's why China is plain hard-to-get and it has to extract American's sincere apologies so the Chinese Communist Party will look strong and solid in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of Chinese people. That Mr. Blinken's expectation should be realistic and should be basically just to tell the CCP the danger to itself for not having such a crisis management mechanism and be ready for not being able to get the CCP to agree to cooperate at all. So, we should have this kind of mental awareness. The expectation should be there, but it should be realistic, I'm saying.

I can guarantee you that just before Blinken’s visit to China, the CCP will do something cantankerous and cranky, particularly in the Taiwan Strait. This is a traditional trick. They try to raise the tension level so that, at a negotiation table, at a dialogue table, they would be able to play a more harsh line and to extract more concessions from its negotiation counterpart. And this, once again, we’re reaching another moment when China plays the US card. Every time there is a crisis for the CCP regime, the CCP always plays the US card. In 1940s, the CCP bamboozled a significant portion of American elite into believing that the CCP will be a better alternative to the Nationalist Party. In the 1970s, to save the CCP from the Soviet invasion, they played the US card, which basically started with the Nixon and Kissinger visits to China.

So in the 1980s and from the 1980s until now, the chance seems to be that they always use the US to gain economic, trade, technological advances, and now we reach the point when China is an international pariah for its Covid behavior, for its siding with the Russia over Ukraine, for its bullying everyone in the neighborhood. So, it is in a pariah status, it's pretty isolated. And also most importantly, China's economy, China's economy is in the tanks and it needs America again to save it from collapse and to regain world trust, and particularly to save its financial institutions, the banks that were in deep debt. So that's why they played the tune of opening up China's financial market in hopes that the Western banks would flock to China to infuse enormous amount of money to save China's financial institutions, so we'd become suckers again. And I think that we have to be very clear on what kind of game China is playing and we should be realistic. Of course, cooperating with China is very important. China is a country that should not be ignored, but we should always be prepared for the possibility that China would not cooperate, no matter what.
Shane Leary:
Just as a final question, to go a little bit broader on the current state of US-China relations, as we step into this possibility of concessions during this visit, do you have any concern that the wind is shifting in the Biden administration vis-a-vis China? Up until now, they've largely continued the policies of the Trump administration and are posturing. Are you expecting a change? And if so, should that worry us?

Miles Yu:
I'm concerned, but I'm not worried. Let me put it that way. There is a certain amount of wishful thinking in the current administration with regard to China, but I also think that in the last several years, China's own behavior, its own statements of strategic intent have actually educated a very big portion of American foreign policy elites into thinking that China up to no good. So, I don't know whether the bottom line will be shifted or not, but I think at least at the operational level, the administration is hoping to have some kind of crisis avoidance system set up. But as I say, China normally doesn't play that way. No matter what, I think the consensus is already in existence in the United States: China is our number one national security threat. So, I think it's very difficult for any administration at this moment of national consensus to change the major course of the bilateral relationship.

Shane Leary:
That makes perfect sense. Well, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much, Miles, it's been a pleasure, and I'll see you next week.

Miles Yu:
See you next week, Shane.

Wilson Shirley:
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