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Henry Kissinger's China Legacy, Taiwan's Defense, and the Past, Present, and Future of Chinese Freedom

China Insider #25

TRANSCRIPT

Miles Yu, *Senior Fellow and Director, China Center, Hudson Institute*

Wilson Shirley, *Media Fellow, Hudson Institute*

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Wilson Shirley:

Hello and welcome back to the China Insider, a podcast from the China Center at Hudson Institute. Miles, how are you doing?

Miles Yu:

Very good, Wilson, and I hope you're doing well.

Wilson Shirley:

I am, thanks. It's, it's really good to see you.

Miles Yu:

Well, good to see you. And for our listeners, this is going to be a very bittersweet session because our incredible host, Wilson, is going to move on to something that's more important. He's going to be greatly missed. And for the last half a year, this podcast has achieved great success and much of that is own to Wilson's consistent professionalism and his insights. And I really enjoy your contribution and enjoy having you as a host. And I hope you all the best in whatever your future pursuit.

Wilson Shirley:

Thank you, Miles, that's, that's really generous of you. And this is my last episode hosting. The China Insider is going to continue, though, so everyone should stay tuned to this channel, continue to rate and review, leave comments. It's been a real pleasure to read those reviews and to see this podcast grow as Miles said. And Miles, I'd like to, before we get into the conversation today, really thank you because when we met at the State Department, you were unbelievably generous to me in teaching me about Chinese history, about US-China relations, and you really changed the way that I think about those issues, which I'm really, really grateful for because I think you are right and that's the most important thing and that's why I wanted to continue this conversation after we left the State Department and the China Insider Podcast has been a great platform for me to continue learning from you and to share you, the most important part of this podcast, with our audience.

So with that said, we thought that this week we would go into a few topics that are not just in the news every day, but sort of longer term issues between the US and China and about Chinese history because Miles is a historian from whom I'm, I've learned a lot and there are a lot of things going on in the news today that have really long histories that it's really important to understand. So Miles agreed to indulge me today by going through not what's, not what's in the news, but sort of longer lessons from history that we can all learn from. And the one that first came to mind for both Miles and me is the legacy of a man who's been at the center of US-China relations for over 50 years. That's Henry Kissinger. He turned 100 on Saturday, which is an unbelievable milestone in any person's life.

His son actually had a column in the Washington Post that talked about his father's longevity. And Henry Kissinger has had an amazing life. He was born in Germany, he escaped just before the Holocaust. He fought with the allies in War II. He helped to liberate a concentration camp.

He's been active in his nineties. He wrote two books in the last couple of years, but we really want to focus on just two years of his life to start off this conversation, that's 1971 and 1972 when Kissinger went to China and then Nixon followed the year after and opened up the era of engagement. So Miles, to start off, those headlines from 1971, 1972 really shocked the world, surprised everyone. But that moment had been coming for a long time. So I wondered if you could talk us through what brought the two countries to that moment and what was the significance of it?

Miles Yu:

Well, first of all, thanks for that overall review of Mr. Henry Kissinger. You said that it's, it's not a news this anything about Henry Kissinger is news and I mean happy birthday to this great man and he, he's turned 100, as you said, Saturday and to live up to 100 years is not a small accomplishment despite all this tremendous progress in biomedicine and health industry. He is very active and he still maintains a robust presence in international politics and a very important voice of geopolitical wisdom. And for that, I have great admiration for this man. Now, of course, the legacy of Mr. Henry Kissinger are many faceted. Of course the most, the biggest legacy 50 years from now will be his longevity and his stay in power in the international affairs. Overall, I think Mr. Kissinger is a man of a past zeitgeist whose genius and wisdom are critically hinged on global geopolitical situations at a time but now no longer exist.

And when you talk about the 1971, 1972, you have to remember Mr. Kissinger was a fixer. He was a presidential fixer. He was ordered by President Nixon to go to China to fix the problem. The most important problem at the time was the US was in the quagmire in Vietnam. And because Mr. Nixon, by 1971 began to panic because his 1968 election was about his promise to Americans that he would end war in Vietnam. And not only did he not end the war, the war under his administration had expanded the time to Cambodia and Laos. So he was into a major problem for his reelection 1972. So he want to send Mr. Kissinger to go to China and go to Soviet Union as well, don't forget that, to end the supply lines to North Vietnam and which is very correct and is a political genius move.

I think it's the most important impetus for the Nixon visit to China in 1972. Of course, China was not really interested in just helping the Americans get out of Vietnam. China wants to bargain. Their bargain is much, much more strategic, much, much more global. In other words, China wants to work with the United States on a much larger scale, not just about Vietnam. If you read the documents, you can see that it was the Chinese that constantly raised the stake of the Nixon's visit to China, not Americans. So we go in, we went in with something very specific about Vietnam and China said, what about Taiwan? Couldn't just say, okay, forget about Taiwan. What about our representation at the UN? We help with that. And then you know, what about Soviet Union? Of course, we are in the Cold War so we can forge an alliance against the Soviets.

Even though Kissinger knew, at the time, to end Americans quagmire in Vietnam, we needed both the Soviet and Chinese assistance. Remember at the time, 1971, China's biggest threat did not come from America. It come from Soviet Union. The two countries, Soviet Union and China, almost went to a nuclear war in 1969, 1970, 1971 and Mao's right-hand man, Marshal Lin Biao, tried to defect to Soviets, so to the Soviet Union. So it was a really big deal. So China

played the American card much more adroitly than Americans played the China card. So this is basically the larger perspective about 1971, 1972 opening to China. As a result, of course, we created the 1972 framework that would guide the US China policy for the next half a century.

Wilson Shirley:

Before we get to the 1972 framework, I'd like to delve into a little bit more of what you just said because it kind of goes against conventional wisdom as I understand it. You said that China in 1971 perceives not the United States as its number one enemy, but the Soviet Union. So conventional wisdom in the US is that by going to China in 71, 72, we are getting China on our side during the Cold War and it's kind of a master move in the era of triangular diplomacy. You're saying there's another side to that story though, because China and the Soviet Union had already split. Where was that coming from and what were relations like?

Miles Yu:

Well, the Chinese-Soviet split took place in late 1950s and early 1960s, and it went open in 1961, 1962 after the Cuban Missile Crisis. And then this basically was the number one threat to the Chinese Communist Party's region survival because in the grand competition for the leadership of the communist movement worldwide, Moscow and Beijing had fundamental clash of ambitions. Yet, they share something in common that is they both support the North Vietnamese communist in the war against the United States in Vietnam. So there's some kind of competition for the favor of Hanoi during much of the war in Vietnam. And in the end, China actually lost the competition to the Soviets because China's insistence on the Vietnamese communist was to wage a protracted war against Americans. In other words, it's a Mao-style "people's war" and you get the American into the quagmire and the US will be exhausted and die.

Soviet Union said, well, you fight the Americans, you got to use high-tech weapons, right? Because the US is a high-tech military? Basically the Vietnamese adopted both. So, they adopt the Chinese strategy of protracted the war and the war lasted very long. But, then, as the irony is, if the war lasts very long, in order to fight the war effectively, Vietnamese would rely more and more on the high-tech weapons only Soviet could provide, but China could not. That means SAMs missile, Mick fighters. And of course, keep in mind at the time China went totally wacky with the Cultural Revolution. So it really didn't have much of the sort of credibility in international affairs. So the Vietnamese, they were of course all communists. They sympathize with China, but they thought Chinese basically they were totally out of their mind. So in the end, by the beginning of 1970s, the Vietnamese moved much closer to the Soviets. And this is the reason why a few years later, Vietnam and China would also split openly and which would lead to the overthrow of the Chinese puppet regime in Cambodia, which is Khmer Rouge in 1975 would not happen. China basically decided Vietnam is no good, they're going to be punished. And when they want to punish the Vietnam, basically it depends more on playing the American card. That's where the 1972 framework had become much more useful and ultimately lead to the all full-blown war between Vietnam and China in 1979.

Wilson Shirley:

That's really good background. So let's continue on through the history. In 1972, when Nixon goes to China, so Kissinger, Kissinger goes in the summer of 71, and then on July 15th Nixon gives a TV address in Burbank, California, it's a seven-minute address, he reveals the Kissinger went and it grabs headlines around the world. Kissinger goes again in October. That's the same time that the UN General Assembly passes Resolution 2758 kicking out Taiwan, what they call the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek and ceding the PRC. And then Ai Haig goes in January and that lays the groundwork for Nixon to go in February 72. So can you just say what happened in February 72 while Nixon was there and what is the lasting legacy of that visit?

Miles Yu:

Well, basically all the major agreements had reached by that time. So Nixon went there just to record the moment of history because Nixon needs that for his 1972 reelection campaign. The 1972 framework that would determine the half a century of US-China relationship in the decades to come, there are many faceted. Well, but one of the, let me see, the most important understanding was that US and China were going to pursue common interests. In other words, we would pursue the area where we would agree, we feel comfortable with, and then about this political ideological disputes, human rights, and even Taiwan, we don't talk about it. And so we narrowed the scope of our engagement with China. At a time looks pretty good because there was contingencies of the Soviet Union and there was the need for detente and there was obviously the most urgent need for Mr. Nixon was us getting out of Vietnam. Those were the specific historical conditions that really made the 1972 agreement possible. China and the United States had been in total isolation and in absolute hostility for 22 years. That's why it's so important for the world to see this moment of peace and give the world a lot of hope at the time, and hope and hype, I would say. Now, that narrow limited scope of engagement with China is great news for the Chinese because they thought we are easy, we give up a lot of things on Taiwan. There is a lot of ground we didn't insist upon and Taiwan was obvious, obviously kicked out of the United Nations even during Kissinger's second trip to China in 1971. And China was delighted and so they wanted to make all the agreements permanent. They thought Americans might change mind with the next cycle of elections. So that's why they insisted on something called the Communique. So that's the background of the Shanghai Communique. China wants to make permanent what has been agreed upon. There are two more Communiques in the years to come. And so that's the commonly known as the Three Communiques which will ultimately lead to American switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan Republic China to People's Republic China in Beijing 1979 under the Carter administration.

Wilson Shirley:

So I want to get to Taiwan in a second, but I also want to go through the Shanghai Communique with you really quickly. It's 16 points long and points one through five are basically the US and China talking about how they got there, what led them to that particular moment. But one thing that you pointed out to me a while ago is that from point six onwards, a lot of it is the US and China kind of stating opposite positions or at least different positions. So the PRC talks about American imperialism and the United States talks about the need for peace and stability around the world. So can you talk about what's a good way to think about the Shanghai Communique given that not everything was agreed upon there?

Miles Yu:

It's a way for both sides to state their position, not necessarily for internal use, but for public display to show that America, Richard Nixon could talk to the Americans' adversary. Therefore, there's a going, there's a saying that goes, only Mr. Nixon could go to China because he had this impeccable anti-communist credential.

Wilson Shirley:

Going back to the Alger Hiss case in the 1950s.

Miles Yu:

That's right. Alger Hiss case and in 1950s as a member of the House on American Activities Committee. But the Shanghai Communique also is the problem. I think it's really the sort of the original sin of many of the problems, particularly with regard to Taiwan. The Shanghai Communique recognized there was one China, but the Chinese government insists that's basically American recognition of Beijing as the only and sole representative of China, including Taiwan. So Americans sort of played the war game a little bit in the end we say no, we recognize there is such a statement about Taiwan being part of China, but "we recognize," that doesn't mean we endorse. So there is some kind of a linguistic ambiguity there. But both sides also agree to two other very important principles guiding the Taiwan issue. That is, American objects to use of force to change status quo in the Taiwan Strait. So in other words we don't want China to wage a war against Taiwan. Another thing that it said is: any political settlement about the future of Taiwan must be agreed to by both sides of the Taiwan Strait. And so those two elements, plus the one China statement should be the integral parts of American's policy toward China, toward Taiwan and toward the entire trilateral relationship. And China wants to insist on only one, that is, only one China. That's the difference between one China principle insisted on by China versus the one China policy insisted upon by the United States.

Wilson Shirley:

So Miles, President Nixon called that trip to China "the week that changed the world." So just to give an overall summation of the legacy of that period and of Henry Kissinger, who again just turned 100 over the weekend, how do you think about that?

Miles Yu:

Half a quarter century later, just before Mr. Nixon's passing away, he said his opening to China in 1972 might have created Frankenstein, and not from President Nixon himself. The reason is that it was a temporary solution to a much larger, complicated bilateral relationship. As I said earlier, Mr. Kissinger is a presidential fixer. He fixed the problem with great skill, but the problem itself would not go away and it would create a bigger problem for the United States in the long run. For example, yes, we got out of Vietnam, but ultimately, communist Vietnam won and committed more egregious crimes after their victory. And also Mr. Kissinger facilitated the opening of China, but at a great cost I might say, and made China what Mr. Nixon said, a possible Frankenstein. So in the 1971 trip and the subsequent meetings between Kissinger, Nixon, Mao and Zhou Enlai, China decided to insist we should not use the US State Department's own interpreters.

This is just egregious demand. And Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon agreed to that. And so this is not really appropriate. And then you might have some very, very permanent damage to the correct understanding of the strategic intent of both sides. I'm not saying there are misunderstanding, but that's potential. So Mr. Kissinger was a great man, but again, he's a man of the past zeitgeist because I think I have some problems with the entire 1970s diplomacy with regard to China in particular. That is, I think Mr. Kissinger may have misread Chinese history. I'm a trend historian and I read Kissinger's books and he has this understanding of China as a nation that has been burdened by 2000 years of imperial history. In other words, China ultimately is a nationalist country and eager for a great revival of the nation. But that's a misreading of the zeitgeist and ethos of modern Chinese history, more than a hundred years ago since the May 4th movement of 1919.

And I think the major ethos of Chinese history is not for a national revival, but for Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. It's basically May 4th movement is the Chinese enlightenment that rejects China's imperial past, embrace the new age of individual freedom and constitutional democracy in particular. So I think Mr. Kissinger may have exaggerated the degree to which China's two millennia history has exerted upon contemporary ethos of China. Number two, if I read Mr. Kissinger, when I read Mr. Kissinger and his books in his writings and even his speeches, I mean he had this really intriguing definition of what constitutes "the Chinese." He used the phrase "the Chinese" all the time. After listening to a while, you, you'll realize when you talk about "the Chinese," he's talking about the senior leaders of Chinese Communist Party, not ordinary Chinese, the dissidents, the other voices from Chinese society, certainly not about the Taiwanese and Hong Kong, all these guys, people. So I have the problem with that definition. So that's why: it's approached top down. And also in 1970, during Cold War, understand that the secret diplomacy may be warranted, but in today's world, secret diplomacy no longer is viable. He is not great at forming consensus, even within the government. Mr. Kissinger had this very strong dislike of State Department, for example.

Wilson Shirley:

Yeah, cut them out entirely from the normalization or from the opening to China.

Miles Yu:

That's right. So that really, really enhance the interservice rivalry within the US government, which is not really good, which would lead the Chinese to exploit our vulnerability. And also I might say, like many great minds in our time such as the George Kennan, and I think Miss Kissinger understand perfectly well the international affairs, but I don't think great minds like George Kennan and Mr. Kissinger would fit a hundred percent well to American democracy because American foreign policy has become much more democratic and transparent. The era of over reliance on a few experts is gone. American people are no longer as apathetic to foreign affairs as in the seventies and sixties. Congress, for example, is now playing a much more important role in deciding and formulating foreign policy. That does not diminish Mr. Kissinger as great man. And his greatest contribution is to add the intellectual dimension to American foreign policy. At the time, when most people were not thinking about global affairs from intellectual and ideological point of view. Unfortunately, I believe that that kind of intellect contradicted with his role as a presidential fixer because fixer has to be very, very problematic and sometimes at a great cost of compromising your principle.

Wilson Shirley:

I think it's a good reminder that more than 50 years later things changed and we get to see how policies that might have been well-intentioned or made sense in the time change. And we talked a lot about Taiwan in the last segment Miles, and I want to talk about Taiwan in this segment as well because a lot has changed with Taiwan since 1971, 1972, it's a democracy, but we no longer recognize it, it no longer has a seat at the United Nations. And it's one of the places that people paying attention to foreign affairs focus on the most. It's a geopolitical hotspot in the world. And you had a really interesting piece recently that's talked about how thoughts about defending Taiwan have also changed over the last few decades. You call it the "globalization of the defense of Taiwan." So I want to ask you what you mean by that when you say that the defense of Taiwan has globalized?

Miles Yu:

The Chinese government always insists the issue of Taiwan is just very regional, it's their business. It is about issue of sovereignty who should own Taiwan. And they insist that there is a robust Taiwanese independence movement which doesn't even exist. People in Taiwan from all sides, across the political spectrum always insist that Taiwan's overwhelming consensus is they want to maintain status quo. There's no need for Taiwan to seek new independence because Taiwan is already an independent country since 1949. It's name is Republic of China in Taiwan. But the reason I said, the reason I wrote that piece is because I believe the Taiwan issue has become part of the global fight for freedom against tyranny, peace against aggression, especially with the war in Ukraine. It's very, very clear that Putin and Xi share exactly the same logic of aggression. That's why global awareness of the commonality between war in Ukraine and China's threat of war against Taiwan, it is pretty obvious to me. It is China that had made the defense of Taiwan a globalized issue because China has used Taiwan as a pretext to develop military capabilities for global domination.

China now has a space command and control capabilities. Its Bluewater Navy is all over the place. It has conducted massive acquisition campaign of global choke points and deepwater ports. It has global satellite relay and tracking stations, it engaged in active creation and formation of global security and economic alliances such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS. None of this is about Taiwan. So the battle of Taiwan will only be the beginning of China's relentless march toward global domination. That's why major countries, notably the US, UK, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, and the key international military and political organizations such as NATO and the EU have all made clear to China that military takeover of Taiwan will meet strong resistance and that the CCP's cost of such aggression will be prohibitive and fatal. So both the Secretary General of NATO, Stoltenberg and the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, have made statements very specific about NATO's resolve and the EU's resolve to defend Taiwan.

And I might also add lastly, Taiwan's defense is internationalized. It's globalized because Taiwan is no longer a tiny country of little consequence. Taiwan is a country of great significance, now, in a global community. For example, it has near complete domination of high-end semiconductors. And its biomedicine, its infectious disease research and prevention, its chemical industries, etcetera are already remarkable. Now when it comes to the United States,

while PRC is United States' number three trade partner after Canada and Mexico, the tiny Taiwan is number eight. It's a model of global good citizenship, in addition. And it is a shining beacon of freedom in Asia and the source of inspiration for the repressed and unfree and captive nation of the PRC. So I think president of South Korea said it very well a few weeks ago. He said like in North Korea, Taiwan is not, is no longer a regional issue, it's a global issue. And in my view for the United States, Taiwan is our new West Berlin. And so I might say "Ich bin ein" Taiwanese.

Wilson Shirley:

So I want to ask one more question about this because you have a really interesting thesis about US-Taiwan relations, in particular. And I want to drill down on that part of Taiwan's global defense. So, US relations with Taiwan have been governed over the last few decades by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three US-China Joint Communiques and the Six Assurances that were issued under President Reagan. But the phrase that most Americans think of when we think of our relationship with Taiwan is "strategic ambiguity." And the idea of strategic ambiguity is we don't say what we would do if the People's Republic of China tried to change the status quo across the strait by force. You disagree with that though? You believe that the US has a policy going back decades since I believe Carter of strategic clarity. So can I ask what do you mean by strategic clarity when it comes to the defense of Taiwan from the US perspective?

Miles Yu:

Because strategic ambiguity doesn't even exist. It's a made up concept in Washington by a few policy makers who really are for policy indolence and rather than active pursuing of strategic clarity. Now listen, the fact that Taiwan Strait has maintained free for over seven decades has nothing to do with strategic ambiguity, it has everything to do with strategic clarity. Before 1980, there was a mutual defense treaty sign between Taiwan and the United States, so that mutual defense is no problem. After 1980, after Mr. Carter unilaterally terminated the treaty, the strategic clarity took on a new form, the Taiwan Relations Act you mentioned, which committed Americans support for Taiwan's defense proportional to the threat Taiwan received from China. And there was also a lot of weapons sales to Taiwan and the presidential declaration. No president has given up the position that the US will defend Taiwan militarily if China launched military action against Taiwan.

And most importantly, I might say, this American strategic clarity is so clear to the Chinese leadership. No one in Beijing has ever believed United States is ambiguous about our resolve to defend Taiwan militarily. So, there you go. I mean strategic ambiguity is just silly talk. I don't think there's any evidence to support that. There's always people who say every time the president declare military intervention in the Taiwan Strait, in case of Chinese invasion, the State Department spokesperson or the White House spokesperson would walk back. And that's nonsense. There's never any walking back because what the State Department official and the White House official always say after presidential declaration of military intervention in Taiwan scenario is always that our one China policy has not changed a bit. So that's affirmation of whatever the president has declared because as I said earlier, our one China policy consists of three integral parts. That is, we recognize those one China, but also we oppose any use of force by any size to unilaterally change the status quo. And third, that any political settlement must be agreed to by both sides of the Taiwan Strait. So you have to look at the three parts altogether to

understand why American presidents declaration of military intervention is in no way contradicting Americans one China policy.

Wilson Shirley:

And that includes President Biden. Four times, I believe, has said that the US would defend Taiwan militarily.

Miles Yu:

Yeah, so you and I worked in the government and I think we understand that kind of a continuity and persistency when comes to Taiwan.

Wilson Shirley:

So I want to close out our last episode together, Miles, and again, the China Insider is going to continue, but this is the last question that I get to Miles, and I want to close it by talking about a subject that we addressed in the first episode that we did together. And that was a series of protests that happened in China, the "White Paper" protests. And this was about ending zero-Covid, but it was also about freedom in China. So I want to ask you about Chinese people and how they think about these protests and their history going back all the way back to the May 4th movement in 1919 that you talked about through Tiananmen in 1989 and to Hong Kong in our own memories in recent years. When you think about these pro-freedom, sometimes pro-democracy protests within China, do you think they're going to continue and what should the outside world make of them?

Miles Yu:

Well, they're definitely going to be continuing because the protests against the repressed regime in China since 1919, since the May 4th Movement, has never stopped. As I say, the preponderant ethos of modern Chinese history in the last 100 years is Chinese citizens' consistent search for democracy and individual freedom, most importantly constitutional democracy. It's actually bizarre and weird for a lot of people in the West to think that all Chinese is the same. They are all burdened by 5,000 years of history. They're all nationalistic, kind of irrational. No, the fundamental confrontation between the people of China, against the Chinese Communist Party has been consistent from beginning. Many of the protests, of course, are very oblique considering the incredibly repressive methods of control in China. But a lot of times those protests came into service like a volcano, like in 1976, the April 15th protest in Tiananmen Square and 1989 protest in Tiananmen Square as well.

And you can see the protest, it's constant. If you ask the Chinese leadership what really is on their mind every day, what is keeping them up at night, I can guarantee you they'll tell you if they're truthful: it is the countless protests each day in China, on a regional level, against injustice and the party rule. So there was a lot of protests there, but it's not reported on, it's, it's sort of remained in subterranean and that's very unfortunate. So, it's very important for us to be on the right side of history when we formulate foreign policy, just as we did in the 1980s and 1990s, on the side of people in Poland, solidarity, on the side of people on street in Czechoslovakia and in Hungary. So this is very important because as the US is the leading

power of global inspiration, and this is really the heart and minds of issues for the United States, if we sort of give up on that power of inspiration, our global leadership will be in serious question.

Wilson Shirley:

I think that's a great note to end on. A fact that really drills home, to me, what you just said, Miles, is that the PRC spends more on internal security, internal repression, than it does on its external defense budget for the PLA. So I think that that really drills at home as well. I want to thank you Miles for allowing me the opportunity to do this and to continue to learn from you through China Insider. And I'm really looking forward to the next stage in the evolution of this podcast. We've reached a great audience that we're very grateful for and it's going to continue to get better and better.

Miles Yu:

Well, good luck Wilson. We'll miss you greatly. And thank you for everything you've done for this podcast.

Wilson Shirley:

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the China Insider, a podcast from the China Center at Hudson Institute. We appreciate Hudson for making this podcast possible. Follow Miles and all of the additional great work we do at [hudson.org](https://www.hudson.org). Please remember to rate and review this podcast and we'll see you next time on the China Insider.