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Agricultural Police Target Crops, the State of Press Freedom, and the PRC's Diplomacy in India and the UK

China Insider #22

TRANSCRIPT

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Wilson Shirley:

Hello and welcome back to the China Insider, a podcast from the China Center at Hudson Institute.

It's Tuesday, May 9th, and we have three topics to go through this week. The first is China's new agricultural management officers who are putting restrictions on crop production around the country. Then we'll discuss a new Reporters Without Borders report that says that China is the second worst country in the world for press freedom. And we'll finish with a note on the PRC's diplomatic moves, including at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in India, and the presence of a CCP official who undermined the Sino-British Joint Declaration's promises, and who attended the coronation of King Charles III over the weekend. Miles, how are you?

Miles Yu:

Very good, Wilson.

Wilson Shirley:

Great. So, I want to start the conversation today with something that's going on in rural China. We've talked about repression and protests mostly in cities over zero-COVID, cuts to healthcare spending, things like that. But in rural China, right now, we're seeing the rise of what are called "agricultural management officers," which is an interesting euphemism. So, in Hubei province, there are reportedly around 5,000 of these people, and I'm just going to read a notice that went up in a northern village in China about what these agricultural management officers are doing and then get your reaction to it. So, the notice is, "Due to the need to create a civilized environment, the planting of climbing vegetables like beans or melons and squashes in front and backyards is strictly forbidden." So, Miles, what is this initiative and why are local officials going after people's gardens and vegetables?

Miles Yu:

So, if you ask the people in China who are the most hated people, normally on top of that list is something called the Urban Management Police. So, those were people called "chengguan." Those were people for many, many years who have been the chief executioner of the Central Committee's order to clean up the city to keep what they call the peasant from the nearby suburban rural area from having their own vegetable and fruit stands. And they're very brutal and they want to keep the Potemkin village image of China being modernized there. So, this is basically the problem for years, years. In the rural area, right next to the big cities, many farmers realized to produce traditional sort of staple crops, no longer make any sense. So, they turned to commercial crops, mostly vegetables and fruit, and to sell in a city. This is not really kosher with the Chinese Communist Party.

So that's why many of China's urban confrontations in the city took place as a result of this Urban Management Police's brutal actions versus, and reaction from the peasants. So that is the underlying issue. I mean, you mentioned in the notice, they say that we have to keep the civilized way of selling vegetables in the city. That's basically implied in that. Now, this new agricultural management officers, this "nongguan" is something new. And this has something to do with the realization, also the failure of the Party for years, to eradicate all this so-called "street stall economy," which is huge in China. So, they realize the only way to eradicate that

problem is not to just kick those guys away from the street, is to go after their crops. Their commercial crops. That's why this agriculture management officers, they're basically cops, and they execute the will of the state, go to this farmland, and destroy the crops that are already there. And so, it's caused a lot of disturbances nowadays in China.

Wilson Shirley:

So why is this a problem for the state? Is it because this is commercial activity taking place outside of state control or is there something else going on here?

Miles Yu:

This has been a problem for a long time because the state wants to basically control the way the vegetables and the fruits were circulated. And so, of course, they want to keep all those farmers, peasants away from urban centers. So, they want to keep the image of China being developed and modernized. So that's the problem.

Wilson Shirley:

And China as a country, it doesn't have enough arable land to feed itself, is that right?

Miles Yu:

It should have enough arable land. However, China in the recent decades has speculated on the land, particularly local government. So, they use the land, very, very fertile lands for commercial development. The government sold those lands to developers and building commercial properties and as well golf courses and shopping malls. So, many peasants basically did not have enough land left. That's problem number one. Problem number two, in connection with that, I think the most important reason right now is Xi Jinping's creating this agriculture management police squads all over China. It's not just in Hubei province, it's everywhere. It is because he is considering China's, what they call food security. He believes that China is now almost like an international pariah in Europe, in America, and in Asia, China is always regarded as some kind of a rogue nation. So, he realizes somehow China may be isolated from the global food supply chain.

So that basically freaks him out. That's why he wants to create agricultural production capability and that's why he ordered the agriculture management officers nationwide to forcefully implement expansion of arable land. Now, much of this land was very tragic, were used to plant trees to preserve soil in the last several decades. All of a sudden, all those trees, young trees, Xi Jinping ordered than to be destroyed. And then so to create this agricultural terraced land, and this is kind of very much reminiscent of what's going on in the late 1950s for the matter of state security and the top leader of the basically ordered the nationwide production of something that is a very counterproductive and which ended in disaster. So, there's a potential there. So, people in China are looking at Xi Jinping and think these methods are not very realistic.

Wilson Shirley:

So, let's talk to close out this segment. Let's talk about the late 1950s, which you just described because when I first read this story, I thought about the late 1950s and collectivization and the Great Leap Forward, obviously a terrible famine during that time that resulted in tens of millions

of deaths. This current move, obviously not on that scale, there is not a famine happening right now in China, but this definitely is a reminder of that time. So how does that play into what's going on, that historical memory of collectivization and of state control over agricultural lands?

Miles Yu:

Xi Jinping is a person deeply, deeply involved in the study of Chinese Communist Party history. So, his reference to the world is very much informed by his understanding of the Party's history. In the late 1950s, Mao Zedong believed that China must have a Great Leap Forward to enhance industrial and agricultural production. So, he ordered a whole nation to give up whatever they were doing and to produce backyard steel furnaces. So, in order to forge steel in the backyard, you have to cut off a lot of trees, cut down a lot of trees. So that's basically created an ecological disaster, number one. Number two, he also forced the farmers to dramatically, artificially increase the yields, which also is very unrealistic. And so that's why famine ensued. As you mentioned, somewhere around 45 million people were starved to death in, between 1959 and 1961. Now you mentioned about what Xi Jinping is doing, forcing the farmers to cut down the trees to artificially hype the yields of the main staples, basically rice and wheat. That has the exactly same impetus as Mao Zedong did in 1950s. So, this is potentially very dangerous and a very foolish move. Many people, commentators in Asia and particularly even inside China, are making this point.

Wilson Shirley:

So, let's talk about something else that's reminiscent of China of decades and decades ago, and that's the state of the information space. How many commentators there are, how freely information is flowing? Because on May 3rd, Reporters Without Borders published the 21st edition of an annual index, the World Press Freedom Index. This year Norway ranked as the 1st for the seventh year running as the most free press. Ireland was 2nd, then Denmark, and the last three countries are all in Asia. There was Vietnam at 178th place, China at 179th place, and in last place North Korea. So, this is pretty staggering. The second most populous country in the world is the second worst place for journalists. So, what is going on in China, particularly over the last couple years that has earned it this terrible spot?

Miles Yu:

Reporters Without Borders is the world's largest press freedom tracker. So, their report has great authority on this subject matter. If you look at the three countries that ranked at the bottom, Vietnam, China, and North Korea, there's something in common, that is they're all communist countries. And that's why press freedom is the most systematically repressed in communist countries because communist countries assume total control of the press by the government. So, China has been consistently ranked at the bottom, either bottom fourth, bottom third, or bottom, this year is bottom, second from the bottom. So, this year's report is particularly poignant. The RSF said, "China is the world's biggest jailer of journalists and one of the biggest exporters of propaganda contents." So, China's press freedom index is so low. It's not only reflecting how repressive it is against journalism but also, it's how offensive the Chinese government has been in providing disinformation and propaganda content worldwide.

And, you know, right now, the known journalists, we know that have been in jail in China is over 100 and virtually all major media outlets in China are the mouthpieces of the Chinese

Communist Party. And every day, every day the Ministry of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee issues a guideline telling all media outlets in China what issues should be censored and how the editorial angle should be. That is very systemic and so on top of that, virtually all meaningful international journalists were either censored or kicked out or major US, for example, US-based newspapers, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, or Washington Post, you don't have a permanent credentialed journalist based in China. So, they have to rely upon Chinese national as a stringer for them.

Wilson Shirley:

Especially since COVID started that's true.

Miles Yu:

That's right. So, for those Chinese stringers and Chinese nationals, they are under even much harsher surveillance, and many of them are jailed and have been tortured. This is basically a very systemic effort.

Wilson Shirley:

So, you talked about repression, you talked about propaganda. I want to get into a third category which touches on a little bit of what you just discussed and that's censorship because the media environment in China is extremely difficult. There's the Great Firewall that prevents Chinese nationals from accessing foreign media and international news. So, what is it like on the ground for Chinese nationals who are trying to figure out what's happening in the rest of the world to get uncensored information?

Miles Yu:

Three major things. Number one, it's extremely difficult to get the information from outside China because the controlled surveillance is so total. However, due to the massive economic engagement with the free trade world, so, you have some kind of windows, very narrow windows by some people who are working, who are associated with foreign companies. For example, they can use VPNs to get on Twitter, to get on Facebook, and Google. So, for those people, the government make sure that you can basically get to know a lot of information, but you definitely cannot really disseminate those information and the government did, make sure that you understand the consequences of doing something that they don't want you to do. Another aspect of that is the internet, obviously, created a kill switch for the Chinese government to control you. Every single Chinese national who would like to be a journalist must, must upload some apps that will track you.

The government just tells you, in order to be credentialed, you have to really apply those apps. One of them is called "Xuexi Qiangguo," which is just sort of "learning from the strong country," literally, that means. So, that's basically a government tracking app if you want to do journalism in China. On the other hand, technology is a double-edged sword for the Chinese government as well, because many people who know the basics of internet security, they can sneak out. So, that's why you have a lot of people who call themselves the "wall climbers." That is, they climb over the Great Firewall and go to the outside and to get the right information. Also, there is a lot of wall-busting apps developed from outside, and you can actually, you know, penetrate into the

Great Firewall. And I might also say some other development might pose a serious challenge to the Chinese Great Firewall, particularly Starlink. That's Elon Musk's global satellite Wi-Fi system. So, we'll see.

Wilson Shirley:

So, we're going to close out this week with a conversation about the People's Republic's new diplomatic moves around the world. So, let's start off with a conversation about a meeting that happened last week, a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Listeners may remember the SCO from last September when Xi Jinping visited Samarkand for his first foreign trip since COVID. He met with Vladimir Putin there and for some background, Russia and China founded the SCO in 2001. It includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus may join pretty soon. This meeting took place in India. India also has the G20 presidency this year, and it was an interesting meeting, just the group of countries that have brought together. So, Miles, what happened in Goa last week?

Miles Yu:

I think China for decades has had a strategic misconception. That is, China firmly believes the world's biggest problem is the United States. So, the world basically is summarized into a versus, the US versus the rest of the world. So, China as a primary diplomatic goal, is to lead the rest of the world against the United States. That has been going on for decades. I said this is the misconception because China has spent a lot of efforts, a lot of time, and resources on some of the regional alliances China has tried to dominate to counter the US-dominated international system. For example, you mentioned Shanghai Corporation Organization, SCO, and the BRICS and several, AIIB, you can all group together. The problem is that the rest of the world is very complicated. If the world did not have United States being the leader, the world would be in total chaos.

That's just the reality. So even within some of the regional groups that China tried to dominate, like SCO or BRICS, not everybody is with China. India and China have enormous problems, the border, among some other issues. Even Russia and China share very different strategical objectives and let alone Brazil and South Africa. Those countries at least have some kind of a basic frameworks of democracy. China is a totally different country. In the end, the Chinese diplomatic moves is going to be futile unless the regime change itself into a free and democratic country. So, in the long run, I remain very optimistic that the US-led international system will prevail.

Wilson Shirley:

That's very good here. But do you think that this move that they have through organizations like the SCO, it seems like they're trying to create alternatives to bodies like the G7, say maybe the G20, but you don't think that this is an appealing alternative because China has isolated itself so much and it doesn't provide sort of compelling leadership, even though India hosted this and the Indian Foreign Minister made some statements that kind of went in the vein of what people are calling multi-alignment? So, continuing to buy weapons from Russia, say while siding with United States on some security issues against China, you don't think that this is an order that is a compelling alternative to the US-led one?

Miles Yu:

Well, China is not a country that has credibility to be a global leader, to be very blunt. You take India for example, China said, "Hey, we oppose United States intervention in other places. US is a source of all the troubles globally. And the US is instrumental in creating the war in Europe and Ukraine, in particular. And so, we call everybody to respect the sovereignty and independence." That sounds very hollow because China is the country that does not respect their neighbors' sovereignty at all.

Wilson Shirley:

Yeah, it has disputes with every one of its neighbors.

Miles Yu:

That's right. So, you don't have credibility, and China also does not have a history of being an honest broker. Everything China involved, it always serves China's self-interest. And for example, the six-party talks to solve the North Korean nuclear problem, it basically [was] futile. So, it's going to be very difficult to see, to imagine China could create a regional alliance that would replace the alliance of democracies such as G7.

Wilson Shirley:

I want to close out on something that was a reminder of those values and that was the coronation over the weekend of King Charles III of the United Kingdom. So, everyone saw the ceremony, but there was an interesting angle in Sino-British relations as well. So, King Charles, when he was the prince in 1997, attended the ceremony where the British handed over Hong Kong and the PRC sent a representative to his coronation. And that was Vice President Han Zang, the former head of Beijing's Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs. So, Miles, what was the significance of Vice President Zheng, of Vice President Han Zheng being there?

Miles Yu:

Now Han Zheng, if I memory, if my memory serves correctly, Han Zheng is still under official US government sanction for his role in repression in Hong Kong. I think it's a mistake for the British to invite him. And British did not invite any head of state, any leader from Iran, from Russia, from other dictatorships and China is given special treatment. This basically is a mistake. I hope, I mean, of course as a result, I mean this British royalty is facing a lot of criticism by the British political crowd as well as British people. So, when we sanction someone for violation of human rights, and that's a value issue, right? So, it is not just a transactional economic issue anymore. On the other hand, I understand the British foreign secretary met with Han Zheng. And I think the issue of human rights and Hong Kong, Xinjiang were discussed and that's a good thing.

Wilson Shirley:

Yeah, well, we'll certainly follow that more closely over the coming months. Thank you so much for the conversation, Miles. Looking forward to another episode of the China Insider with you next week.

Miles Yu:

Okay, looking forward to it.

Wilson Shirley:

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