The 34th Anniversary of Tiananmen, The Significance of AUKUS, and The PLAN’s Taiwan Strait Brinkmanship

China Insider #26

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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Miles Yu:

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

Today we have three topics to discuss. Number one is on the 31st anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre, we are going to contemplate the Tiananmen movement of 1989 as a momentous history making global event, not just the Chinese event. The second topic we’re going to talk about today is the future of free and open Indo-Pacific. The third topic discussed about what just happened in Taiwan Strait and in Shangri-la defense dialogue in Singapore. And of course, we’re going to focus on the Chinese military principalship, particularly in Taiwan Strait, as a New York collision just took place between the American worship and the Chinese one. Joining me today is Mr. Shane Leary, who has been in the background from the beginning of this broadcast. He’s played a very important role in providing great support for the show. So today he’s actually the co-host with me. Shane, thank you for joining me and how are you?

Shane Leary:

Good, and thank you for having me, Miles. Really excited to be on the show. I'll do my best to try to fill Wilson's shoes and keep this wonderful project going. With that, I think, why don't we just jump into the topics for this week. So this past Sunday, June 4th was the 34th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, one of the most harrowing moments in recent Chinese history, in which thousands of student protestors were killed and many more wounded by the People’s Liberation Army on orders from the Chinese Communist Party to put down national pro-democracy protests. As you sit here today, I mean, what is the legacy of Tiananmen Square in the US in particular and for China's international image, but most importantly within China itself.

Miles Yu:

Every year on June 4th, and it's a very solemn moment for us to remember what happened 34 years ago. The reason why it is still remembered is because the power of emotion is still there, because it has never been accounted for. And also China is still a dictatorship. So what the protestors try to achieve has failed. So the struggle continues, as we say, the very important thing about Tiananmen is that we have to understand the Tiananmen movement for seven weeks that shattered the world is not just a Chinese event, it is the world event. It had a profound impact on the world events. We said 1989 is the year when communism collapsed in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union at the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union, I should say, that revolution was all triggered by the events in Tiananmen Square a few months before that started in mid April, and the ended tragically in the early mornings of June 4th, 1989.

This is how it should be remembered. The Tiananmen movement was accompanied by Mr. Gorbachev's visit to China in mid-May, a few couple weeks before the massacre. Gorbachev was the symbol of communist reform and he started the glasnost and he started the Perestroika, which began the process of dismantling of the Soviet communist system. So he was regarded by a lot of people in China as a hero to reform communist system. By that time, Chinese communist system has reached a dead end. Deng Xiaoping wanted to open up China to the world economic system. However, he wants to hold on to the political dictatorship. So this is basically a dead end, and it was not going to work. When Gorbachev went to China. It had great inspiration for the protestors, which who had already been on the square for a couple weeks, and he was the leader of the Soviet system that still occupies Eastern Europe.
So those captive nations are watching what Gorbachev would respond to the Tiananmen massacre. So right after Gorbachev left China and the massacre occurred, so he was forced to make a comment on the massacre itself. And so the massacre is so morally repulsive to the world, it made Gorbachev impossible to repeat what the Soviet had done to the Hungarians 1956 until the Czechs in 1968, meaning crackdowns. So Gorbachev made it very clear he would never repeat what the Soviet did in 1956, 1968, and in 1989, just a few weeks before. So that is such a powerful inspiration for people in Eastern Europe and with the impossibility of Soviet, the military intervention, revolution erupted in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, in Romania. That's basically the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Communist system in Eastern Europe. So this is the very important first to understand the only country, eastern European country that resisted this kind of a call for liberation was East Germany, which was then ruled by this diehard communist Eric Honecker.

Now Honecker was so notorious in East Germany at the time, he was forced to flee. He resigned. succeeding was the young politburo bureau leader by the name of Kranz. Now Kranz was a younger guy, but he was also pretty pro the Chinese Communist party. So after the massacre, he flew to Beijing and took picture with the Chinese Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping and other people. He become enormously unpopular and notorious. After he returned from China, he was associated with the butchering in Beijing and the people were fed up with him. So you have massive protest throughout the entire East Germany, which made Kranz and the East Germany Communist Party impossible to continue to rule. And then on November 9th, the politburo of East Germany Communist party finally made the decision to open up the Brandenburg gates and which led to the downfall of the berlin wall. So all the symbolic and a substantive revolutions that took place in Eastern Europe after the Tiananmen massacre was directly triggered by what went on in Tiananmen Square.

So this is really, really important. Now, the first American politician that recognized this connection between the collapse of Soviet Union and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Tiananmen massacre was Mike Pompeo. Mike Pompeo on the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen Massacre, which is in 2019. He issued a very long and thoughtful statement, and I'm going to read one paragraph in this regard and I quote, “we salute the heroes of the Chinese people who bravely stood up 30 years ago in Tiananmen Square to demand their rights. Their exemplary courage has served as the inspiration to future generations calling for freedom and democracy around the world, beginning with the fall of the Berlin War at the end of communism in Eastern Europe and in the months that followed,” end quote.

Shane Leary:

That's very powerful. From what you're saying, Tiananmen is this incredibly decisive moment and we're watching the cracks form. And yet it almost from what you're saying, it almost sounds to me like the Chinese Communist party in a way is signaling or sort of inheriting a brutality that's sort of fading away from the Soviet Union. How is it that this wasn't more of a wake up call for us that only 10 years after this event we have the normalization of trade relations with China and we're in entering into one of our most optimistic periods with regards to US China relations? What was the reaction the US like at the time?

Miles Yu:
The US president was George HW Bush and who is a cold war warrior who is deeply into this business of containment. He did not see the destruction of communist system as an immediate goal, rather content it. So he, he’s a personally a friend of Deng Xiaoping. He was advised by some of his legendary cold war warriors, most notably Mr. Henry Kissinger. They feel obviously morally repulsed by the brutality of the massacre. On the other hand, they also want to maintain cordial relationship with China and then they resort to secret diplomacy. So they condemn China and the embargo Chinese enhanced export control to China. But then secretly, they basically send liaison to talk to the Chinese Communist Party, say, Hey, listen, we didn’t mean it. So that’s basically is a very, very bad example. The lessons of Tiananmen to the Americans should be number one, that the illusion that the Chinese communist party representing the Chinese people is just that illusion. That illusion should have been shattered right there because the Tiananmen movement was the fullest demonstration of the uncompromising interest of the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party. And you have enormous demands to end communist dictatorship even from some of the people within the Chinese communist system. And here we have the excerpt of the Chinese establishment propaganda outlet that is a radio Beijing, which is the main English language international propaganda. And then listen to what the announcer said as the massacre was happening in Tiananmen Square.

Radio:

This is radio Beijing. Please remember June the third, 1989, the most tragic event happened in the Chinese capital Beijing. Thousands of people, most of them innocent civilians, were killed by fully armed soldiers when they forced their way into the city. And now the killed are our colleagues at Radio Beijing. The soldiers were riding on armored vehicles and used machine guns on thousands of local residents and students who try to block their way. When the army convoys break through, the breakthrough soldiers continued to spray their bullets indiscriminately at crowds in the street. Eyewitnesses say some armored vehicles even crossed foot soldiers who hesitated in front of the resisting civilians. Radio Beijing English department, deeply mourns those stars in a tragic incident and appeals to all its listeners to join our protest for the gross violation of human rights and the most fibro suppression of the people. The good abnormal situation here in Beijing, there is no other names we could bring you. They necessarily ask for your understanding and thank you for joining us at this most tragic moment.

Miles Yu:

But the American elite would not really sort of recognize this sheer fact that Chine communist party should not be representing the Chinese people. I remember Mr. Henry Kissinger right after the massacre published your article in the Washington Post. The title of that is called, “Calling Deng Xiaoping a Dictator is unfair.” He was defending the Chinese Communist party butcher at the time. So there is this kind of a lessons unlearned that's very, very unfortunate. Secondly, and I think most importantly, American foreign policy, particularly US policy toward China should really be focused on major ethos of 1989. It is not about the future of a democratic China guided by the so-called the CCP reformers. The lesson of 1989 should be even the most reform-minded Chinese communist party leader would not pause for a moment to butcher its own people, when it comes to regime survival. Deng Xiaoping was the most open-minded reformer in China, but even that person would become instantly an orchestrator of the massacre killing his own people. So that illusion should have been long gone, but that illusion continued on for another two or three decades, which is very unfortunate. So that's why during the Trump administration, we really focused on Americans moral and diplomatic focus going back not to the time when, Deng Xiaoping and those reformers were in charge, but to 2989 when the
Chinese people were demonstrating their disenchantment against the Chinese communist party. So the party and the people were absolutely not the same thing.

Shane Leary:

No, and you're right. I mean it shows a remarkable degree of continuity as you've argued before that the reformers we would point to show these shifts and changes in potential hope in the party's direction are the ones responsible for the most tragic moment in recent Chinese history. Just as a last question, I mean, what is it like today? I mean we just got a taste of the propaganda at the time, but if you are a Chinese citizen today living in the mainland, what is June 4th like for that person? Is this something that is only really discussed in dissident communities? Are people aware of it but they don't speak about it?

Miles Yu:

Well, first of all, the Chinese government has conducted the most comprehensive memory erasing that is they try to basically erase any visible signs of Tiananmen massacre. And so the word that Tiananmen means totally different things in China, outside of China, it's one of the very historical infamous signs like Munich and Pearl Harbor. So it's not just a place, it has a very noxious historical meanings. So in China, Tiananmen has none of that. So generations of Chinese people would not know what happened on June 4th, 1989 today in China. That's tragedy. But as I know, memories are deep and the resentment was subterranean and can erupt at any moment like a volcano. So there are a lot of people on the anniversary each year try their best ways to commemorate this historic event. In Hong Kong, yesterday, the police just arrest a bunch of people who simply holding sign that says June 4th. And then last Friday there was a concert in the Chinese national stadium; there was a brave woman went up to one of the balcony and displayed a huge American flag.

And with the words from the Declaration of Independence on that, she was momentarily manhandled and arrested. The most poignant image from Tiananmen Square was the erection of the goddess of democracy by the Chinese students. And that was the image similar to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. It's a symbol of freedom. It shows once again the enormous inspirational power of the United States. The essence of Tiananmen is really about freedom. It's about democracy and of course Chinese government, also Chinese people were also very resentful of the concomitant result of lack of democracy, freedom, which is corruption and other things. So that's why today if you ask a traveler from China, what do you want to know most? And one of the usual answers is that I want to know what heck actually happened in Tiananmen on June 4th, 1989. Books are banned and voices are silenced inside China. So that's why they want to know. And gradually, more and more people will know. And so there are a Tiananmen mothers, the mothers of the children who were killed and they're still alive, many of them very brave. And each year we award Nobel Peace Prize. And I think that group deserves Nobel Prize many times over.

Shane Leary:

And I mean one can only imagine the internal turmoil of having a sense of this event, but not having the full picture and not being able to get that without leaving the country. Switching gears to the preservation of freedom today, just this past Tuesday, the China Center, we hosted an event, it was a panel with 70th Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, former Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison and former Prime Minister of the UK Boris Johnson, to discuss the
historic AUKUS agreement. This is just to remind our listeners a trilateral security partnership. This was unveiled in September of 2021, which aims to enhance collaboration between the three countries through comprehensive information sharing and technology exchange in particular, in the most immediate term, supporting and assisting the Royal Australian Navy in acquiring nuclear powered submarines. So I just want to as a sort of follow up to this event, miles, why and how did this agreement come into being and what is its significance for the preservation of a free and open Indo-Pacific?

Miles Yu:

This is actually one of the many groupings in Indo-Pacific. Right now, we have AUKUS, but in addition we have Quad for example, that consists of partners of US, Japan, India and Australia. And then of course in addition to that, we also have a whole bunch of US bilateral–mutual-defense arrangements with countries like Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. Even with Thailand to a certain degree. The reason why we have this kind of alliance system is because all the countries in the Pacific are facing a common threat and that's China. A common threat demands common defense. So there's always a strong element of security and defense in all these groupings. AUKUS is purely defense. AUKUS also involves something that's a very real and that is most advanced technology of military lethality. You might say, despite all those groupings, right, there are core coalitions, there is auxiliary coalitions and I would consider AUKUS as a core coalition because this is three of the world’s democracies and they come together to build a nuclear powered submarine fleet for Australia, which is strategically located in the Indo-Pacific area and which obviously is going to be a very important battleground in the future showdown between tyranny and freedom in that area.

So that's why this AUKUS arrangement is of great significance. I'm glad that that Hudson Institute’s China Center was able to get the three major architects of the AUKUS: former Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison and former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and our own Secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, to talk about this. You couldn't get any more authority sources than that.

Shane Leary:

For our listeners, if you're interested, you can find the full panel hudson.org. The title of the event is "Partnership of Freedom AUKUS Viewed by Its Architects." It was an incredibly substantive discussion and I would encourage any of you who are interested to check that out. And also I'll end by saying, as we noted in the event, it's great to see that AUKUS has continued to enjoy bipartisan support and be carried through to the next administrations in each respective country. As our last topic for the day, this happened just very recently. This past Saturday, we had a close encounter between the PLAN and the US Navy during a joint Canada-US mission sailing through the Taiwan Strait, the USS Chung Hoon, an American destroyer was effectively cut off by a Chinese war that had been shadowing the exercise up until that point, as I understand it, before it rapidly altered course and instructed the American ship to move, telling it there would be a collision. The US destroyer was forced to slow down and the ships came quite close, only within 150 yards of one another, which to our listeners, if that doesn't sound quite that close for vessels of that size, as I understand it, Miles, you'd know more than I do, but there's very little maneuverability in such close quarters; so, it really was quite a close call. What is your impression of what happened here? How serious was this and what could have been going through the minds of the crew of that Chinese warship to take such brazen action?
Miles Yu:

China is a big country with nukes and increasingly lethal military weapon platforms, but it's a big country that behaves like a backyard bully. It's really irresponsible, it's very dangerous. In the old days during the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States had the capability to destroy each other mutually. So realizing that the gruesome outcome, both Soviets Union and the Americans leaders could actually sit down and talk about the rules of engagement to prevent accidental miscalculation of strategic intent. China does not play that game. China, as I say, behaves like just a bully. And the Chinese military has repeatedly refused Americans calls for setting up a rule of engagement at high sea, and in air, and even on the ground. Now you can see the Chinese military operators are full of road rage and doing some dangerous unprofessional maneuvers to heighten the tension.

Sometimes, this is basically a challenge tactics. It's basically what China is called to use confrontation to extract a cooperation. So ultimately they want to do something dangerous, irresponsible, to scare its adversaries and so that at the negotiation table they could extract some concessions and that's a very, very terrible irresponsible way. It's brinkmanship. It is a gambler's mentality. The Chinese defense minister General Li Shangfu said at the Shangri-la just last week, and he said, oh, we prefer, we actually choose dialogue over confrontation. That is at the same time this dangerous naval encounter occurred on Taiwan Street, which is international water is an open sea. So the Chinese leaders basically can say things from both sides of the mouth simultaneously. And it's really, really, it is hypocritical and irresponsible and ultimately very dangerous. And I think in the world should really realize how dangerous China is, not just because of its growing capability, not because of the strategic intended to dominate the world, but it's the way its operations was were conducted.

It's very unfortunate. Now, ultimately, I think the victim would not only be other people, but also the Chinese themselves, it shows that how you responsible, how dangerous other people, they'll take collective actions. Remember the beginning of the worsening of the current China-Japan relationship began with Chinese vessels ramming Japanese vessels in open sea. They would do the same thing with the Koreans and same thing with the Filipinos. It's a really an international problem. And so that's why China should never take other countries eagerness to seek dialogue, to set up a rule of engagement as a sign of weakness. And so this is something that we should all do together.

Shane Leary:

But so you're saying, I mean the way you're framing this, there's some real continuity to this. We've seen this before, but this is everyone, this is the sort of incident in the Taiwan strait in particular that everyone fears. Outside of a planned military invasion every time they ramp up their exercises, for example, when Nancy Pelosi visited and Taiwan does something they don't like and they start firing missiles, things like that, running military drills, there's always this fear that there could be this sort of accidental collision or escalation. Is something like this intentionally coordinated? Is this a one-off by a brazen warship or is this the sort of thing that is centrally commanded?

Miles Yu:

There has been some kind of stereotypical bias against Chinese drivers in the United States. I can tell you that's absolutely nonsense because Chinese drivers are very responsible just like
everybody else. But it is not stereotypical assumption to say that the Chinese military are bad drivers. They are terrible drivers. They don't follow the rules. That's why rules based international system is important. Yes, it is not an accident, it's always a pattern. Remember in 2001, the EP-3 incident. That was caused by the Chinese fighter pilot's, unprofessional maneuvering, and then that caused basically a collision right and this guy falling down and was killed. So this is a very dangerous pattern. China does this all the time as I mentioned, that's their way to demonstrate how angry, how upset they are over routine and the legal operations of Western powers, particularly United States, Japan and South Korea. No, this is not by accident. This is basically their habit. Bad driving always comes from the bad habit. If we don't change the habit by following the rule, and then we will get all be in trouble sooner or later.

Shane Leary:

Now that makes perfect sense. And maybe as a last question, if I could just ask you, take us to the ship itself. Is this problem caused by any sort of structure of command within the PLAN? I know that there is Chinese Communist Party commissars on every ship and there's been a series of military purges so that it appears to be on some level like this, some sort of tension.

Miles Yu:

The Chinese military is highly disciplined, no commander, no skipper would act alone without the instruction from above. This kind of behavior is definitely the expression of the Chinese strategic mindset. It's the expression of the high command from the Chinese government. This kind of a passive aggressive behavior, irresponsible behavior is not just reflected in military specific operations. You might recall I mentioned about the EP-3 incident in 2001. Right after that, whenever there's a crisis going on, and also two years before that, in 1999, there was an accidental bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in the course of civil war. Each time there was a crisis, the American president would urgently place a call to the Chinese leader. The Chinese leader each time would refuse to pick up the phone call and they just been passive aggressively respond to the Americans request for dialogue. And on each incident I mentioned earlier, general secretary, Jiang Zemin, basically just not the honor Americans request to have a dialogue that solve the problem from the highest level and then continue on this diatribe against Americans evil deeds. So this is all very political. It's reflection of the Chinese overall political culture and the strategic mentality. And that's why the China problem is not just operationally formidable. It's also strategically very important for us to remove the whole thinking. Otherwise, we will all be in trouble.

Shane Leary:

I think that's all the time we have today. Miles. Thank you so much for having me on.

Miles Yu:

Thank you, Shane for joining me today. And I will see you next week.

Shane Leary:

See you next week, Miles.

Shane Leary:
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