Protests in China, Xi Goes to Saudi Arabia, and More…

China Insider #1

TRANSCRIPT

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Wilson Shirley:

Hello and welcome to the China Insider, a podcast from the China Center at Hudson Institute. Every week we look at a few stories you may have seen about China and some you may not have. We try to explain what's going on with the world's most populous country, how we got here, and what is to be done. I'm Wilson Shirley Media fellow with the China Center, and I'm joined by Miles Yu, the center's director. Today is Tuesday, December 6th. We have three items to discuss on our first podcast. The first is the protests across China that have been happening over the last week and a half and what we can expect. Then we'll move on to General Secretary Xi Jinping's trip to Saudi Arabia for a summit in Riyadh. And finally, a look back at the legacy of Jon Zin who died on November 30th. Miles, it's good to see you.

Dr. Miles Yu:

Good to see you, Wilson.

Wilson Shirley:

We've been talking about doing the China Insider for a while and I think that the last couple of months have really shown that there's not ever going to be a shortage of things to talk about beginning with the 20th party Congress until now. But I thought since this is the first episode, it could be good to introduce what our objectives with China Insight are and then also what your work at Hudson Institute in the China Center there are all about.

Dr. Miles Yu:

Well, thank you. I think using this forum of mass communication podcast. Hopefully we try to establish a mechanism where ideas about China, what's going on and what the rules of many of the China phenomenon are, and with the listening audience, and I think we are trying to sort of look at the China challenge from inside out. That is, we're going to spend more time on what's going on in China and then we figure out what will be the right responses to many things that are happening in China. So, I think this is basically a national dialogue in a way it's global dialogue on China. And these dialogues have experienced a fundamental change in the last five, six years. The China challenge effects not just the United States, but everybody else.

Wilson Shirley:

To start with inside of China, hence the name of the podcast China Insider. A couple of months ago you showed me an image that quite honestly, I didn't think much of. It was of a banner hanging over Beijing's third Ring Road and it had slogans on it like “Remove the Trader Xi Jinping, Freedom, not Lockdowns, citizens, not slaves”. And I honestly didn't think much of it because we see political banners in the United States all the time, but now two months later or a month and a half later, we heard a lot of those same slogans coming out of the mouths of protestors in cities across China at more than 79 university campuses. So, I thought it'd be a good place to start by saying what happened with these protests over the last 10 days or so and what do you make of them?

Dr. Miles Yu:
China is a dictatorship, like in all dictatorships, the underlying impetus for protest has always been there. So, the interesting thing is the triggers and opportunities, and I think at the incident you mentioned is one lone brave young man unfurling a banner demanding freedom on the periphery of the Beijing city that provided the inspiration and sort of like an ember that ignited the prairie fire, right. So, there's several other landmarks, landmark triggers in this that cause to this wave of protest. Soon after that young man's brave action and it disappear obviously. But then you have this incident in one of the apple's sweat shops in China. Whereby tens of thousands of workers were locked down inside the dormitory.

Wilson Shirley:
And that was at the Foxconn factory, right, which is where our iPhones are made the protest that you're talking about.

Dr. Miles Yu:
Correct. That's correct. The iPhone 14 I believe is the pro max are made there

Wilson Shirley:
Yes, I've asked for one for Christmas, but the supply chains are very delayed, so I will not get one in

Dr. Miles Yu:
Time. Okay, well we'll see. That's morally reprehensible. The reason that that's very important that tens of thousands of workers were locked up inside the dormitories without food, without water, without medical supply. And as a matter of fact, it was the death of eight women in one dormitory that caused the massive exodus from the sweat shop. And so that triggered the national outrage. And then of course the third trigger I might say is this a very awkward forced appointment of Xi Jinping into the third term that occurred in the middle of October. People thought this to be very absurd and that basically added to the fuel of this national outrage. But the final trigger that really provoked the nationwide outrage and protest was the burning death of 10 people in the sky in a high rise in Xinjiang. Those people were locked down inside the building and the government lie about it.

Finally, you had this nationwide protest. The intriguing part of all of this really is that the videos images were widely spread in China on WeChat, on Chinese version of TikTok. And I think this is very peculiar because Chinese government definitely has the capability to block all of them. I think the reason why they could not and did not do may have something to do with the fact that Apple might just withdraw because of international outrage if they block it and also may have some kind of a collusion within the party elements who were totally fed up with Xi Jinping.

Wilson Shirley:
So, I've heard that the reason that the sensors have not been or were not at the time going after these messages as you described us then is that it was happening over the weekend and so a lot of sensors are actually not working over the weekend. You think that there are two other alternative explanations as you just said, Apple and potential divisions among elites within the party that are a better explanatory variable. Is that right?
Dr. Miles Yu:

No, the weakened explanation is very weak. So, because Chinese leadership and its repression work 24/7, there's no rest.

Wilson Shirley:

So, I want to talk about where we go from here. The protestors showed a huge amount of bravery to go out and to show defiance against the regime. What do you think Xi Jinping will do going forward in order to assert control?

Dr. Miles Yu:

I think he's going to basically try to avoid a direct Tiananmen style disaster that will put his regime, his reign into question. So, what he's going to do is basically ease the lockdown a little bit and then defuse the tension at the moment. And then he's going to continue with the crackdown through its massive surveillance and repression regime. This is exactly what happened because Xi Jinping has announced he's going to release somewhat of the restrictions on lockdowns as you see in some cities, but essentially the measures of the lockdown still remain. People are still required to have a daily testing of their covid cases and so people continue to be frustrated and outraged cops are going door to door to check if anybody was involved in the protest. You see the repressive measures continue and it's going to deepen.

Wilson Shirley:

Yeah, I want to talk about Covid zero, which is the policy that was the trigger for a lot of the protests that we've seen over the last couple of weeks and specifically what the path is out of that. You talked a little bit about how there's been a little bit of a dialing back of some of the worst restrictions. The vice premiere had a quote that has been going around about facing a new stage and mission in the anti-covid campaign, there has been a new vaccination campaign that's been rolled out now. There's a campaign to get 90% of people over the age of 80 years old vaccinated by January. That's roughly 36 million people in China. So, what is the future of Covid zero and is there any way out of it for Xi?

Dr. Miles Yu:

His response to the Covid outbreak from the beginning has been misguided by this stubborn commitment to the communist ideology. In the history of the PRC, public health crises like this all for that matter, all other natural disasters were not first and foremost view as a crisis that might cause enormous harm to the people. Instead, the party always looks at this kind of events as the great opportunity to showcase the all-around greatness of the party, to master the entire nation's resources to do big things. So, this is the basic, exactly what happened in China in January, 2020 right after the outbreak of the Covid in what Xi Jinping gave an overall comprehensive instruction to the nation that he's going to use this to showcase the advanced nature of the Chinese Communist Party and the superiority of the socialist system that were different from any other Western democracies.

So, from beginning he's trying to do all things that are different from other people. If United States does this, he's going to do the other way. So that's why he believed that the western response to Covid has been a total failure. That's the major theme of the propaganda inside
China. Therefore, the Chinese Communist Party, the party alone can do a superb job. His approach of course was to have nationwide lockdown and who believe that the Chinese communist party and its omnipotence could eradicate every single case of covid infection in China. That's where the phrase zero covid came from. Now the prices the people have to pay is not in his concern. That's why he's been totally callous to the people and that callousness is nothing new.

Wilson Shirley:

One thing that's really impressed people over the last couple of weeks is the bravery of the protestors that are going out into the streets or have gone out into the streets across China. Of course, it's not unprecedented. There has been pro freedom, there have been pro-democracy protests in China over the course of several decades. So how does what we've seen over the last couple of weeks fit into that history?

Dr. Miles Yu:

Well, public protest in China in modern China started just a little bit over a hundred years ago in 1919 with the so-called May 4th movement where students in China basically went to a Tiananmen square to protest. What that May 4th movement demanded was two, the democracy and science. But it really boils down to one thing that is a constitutional democracy. Almost exactly same thing happened hundred years before that in Europe, in the post Napoleonic Europe, when people were trying to sort of fight back their restoration of monarchy and to install constitutionalism across Europe. Public protest become widespread for the next 30 years after 1919, as political rights expanded, however, the CCP had organized a massive underground movement using what they call the united front strategy to hijack this public protest. They were very successful. So, between 1927, 1949, when the Chinese nationalist government, rural China, this public protest has been sort of a Shanghai, if you will, into regime toppling methods. And in 1949 the Chinese Communist Party succeeded. Of course, after 1949 when China was ruled by the communists. No public protest of any sort was allowed. Basically, there have been no public protest as you saw in the 1920s and thirty's and forties. But there were oblique and indirect mostly using the occasions of the death of some senior leaders within the Chinese Communist Party, for example, in 1976 and in 1989 when Premier Jiao Enlai died and when former party chief Huobong died. But those protests were all short-lived because they were all closely associated with the power grab within the inner circle of the CCP. So, the moment the protest turned political for freedom and democracy they were ruthlessly cracked down, as you saw in the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The current wave of protest is unique in that it is more direct upfront without heavy association with the white faction of the CCP during the power struggle. So that's why I think this current wave of protest is uniquely significant.

Wilson Shirley:

I want to change topics now to our second issue for the week, which is something that's happening. Xi Jinping is going to Riyadh as early as tomorrow. He hasn't been to Saudi Arabia in six years, the last time he traveled to the Middle East and he's going there for a China-Arab summit. So, what is his objective in going to Saudi Arabia, especially now, and how does it build on the previous two trips that he's taken over the last couple of months, one to the G 20 and one to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?
Dr. Miles Yu:

This is a very typical Chinese global diplomacy, which is not really based on values and principles, but based upon opportunism. So, Xi's trip to Saudi Arabia is very timely because it is aimed at countering the U.S. closer relationship with Saudis and who's deeply alarmed by China's close relationship with Iran, Saudi's enemy, which brings us to the issue of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. So Xi's hallmark approach to global strategy to create global dependency on China has been what we called the Belt and Road Initiative. In the Belt Road initiative, which he rolled out in 2013. Iran occupies a very central role, so does Saudi Arabia. In the Belt and Road initiative, Iran would have to be very closely related to the so-called belt, which is from western China all the way through central Asia and then through Central Asia to eastern Europe. So having Iran within China's orbit has always been his primary objective.

So, Iran at the time in 2013 was under severe international sanctions, so Xi could not really move to forge what he called Chinese Iranian comprehensive strategic partnership, CSP in short. But he waited, waited until 2015. In 2015 there was the JCPOA sanctioned on Iran. So Xi would become the first foreign leader to visit Iran in hope to sign this CSP. But in 2016, a few months later, Donald Trump was elected. Trump stopped that momentum. China waited for four more years, seven weeks after Joe Biden became president, Xi moved on this CSP initiative in middle March 19th, 2020, last year, China and Iran finally signed this mammoth Chinese-Iranian comprehensive strategic partnership, which would require China to provide $400 billion to build Iran's infrastructure. We're talking about banking, railways, telecommunication, artificial intelligence, and the military.

So, this very big deal, really spooked Saudi Arabia because Saudis and Iranians do not get along. So, this is one reason is why Xi Jinping has to go to Saudi Arabia and this is his opportunity. Now, why are Saudis important for the Belt and road Initiative? Because Saudi is also crucial to the second part of the B R I. That is the road. The road is euphemistically referred to as the maritime Silk Road. So, he wants to go there to basically bring Saudi into his orbit and to provide a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. And this time is very difficult because Saudi is not as internationally isolated as Iran and Saudi has much closer ties to the United States than Iran. And of course, Saudi also is warming up to Israel. So, we'll see what Xi can accomplish. I don't think he's going to be very successful.

Wilson Shirley:

You don't think he's going to be very successful. So how will you be able to tell? Will it be in the next week or two or will you be looking for longer term signs of new deals on things like energy or security?

Dr. Miles Yu:

Well, I don't want to say Saudi Arabia wants to leverage upon the world in terms when it comes to oil, so we'll see.

Wilson Shirley:

All right. So, Miles earlier in the conversation you mentioned how a lot of the protests in the PRC'S history have happened around the deaths of leaders. And it's an amazing coincidence that on November 30th, Jiang Zemin, who was the general secretary from 1989, he took over 20
days after the Tiananmen protests were crushed and after Solidarity won the elections in Poland, he was general secretary until 2002 and head of the Central Military Commission until 2004. He just died right around the time of these protests. So first reflect on the legacy of Jiang Zemin and what the timing right now might mean.

Dr. Miles Yu:

Jiang Zemin is a very peculiar figure in the pantheon of Chinese Communist leaders because he came right after The Tiananmen Massacre when Deng Jiaoping chose him because he was the party chief in Shanghai where he successfully prevented a massive protest from spreading out to threaten the regime. So, he was rewarded with the position of the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. But Jiang Zemin is very interesting because he was the product of the Soviet Union, went to school there. He was a diehard Marxist, he was an ideolog basically. On the other hand, he also pretended to be Westernized, he sung opera, he could recite Lincoln's Gettysburg address without really understanding a single word of that significant document. As a result, Jiang Zemin is also a tyrant. During his reign, he ordered the systemic suppression of the Falun Gong, for example, and his measures against Tibetans and Uyghurs were equally draconian.

On the other hand, he was also deeply, deeply anti-American. And during his reign, there are two things related to the United States that took place. One is the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and another one is in 2001, the EP three plane crash incident. In both cases, Zemin displayed his extreme anti-US sentiment, as a matter of fact, the US President couldn't pick up the phone and get through to him. So, he would rather travel to Havana, Cuba to hob knob with Castro and sing anti-American songs and write writing poetry mocking in the United States. So, this is a guy who is a really sort of beguiling character on one hand, and dangerous one on the other.

Wilson Shirley:

Thanks Miles. We've talked a lot about Chinese history from Mao to Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping, and we'll have a lot more to talk about over the coming weeks and months. I'm really looking forward to continuing this podcast, China Insider with you. Thanks.

Dr. Miles Yu:

Great. See you soon.

Wilson Shirley:

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