Critical Issues Confronting China

On the Trail of Xi Jinping:

A New York Times Correspondent on Reporting in China

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The grandiose military parade along Chang-an Boulevard in Beijing on October 1, China’s most recent national day, was the third time President Xi Jinping inspected the Chinese military with tremendous fanfare since he took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party at the end of 2012. Xi’s rein coincides with the reporting work of Jane Perlez as Bureau Chief of the New York Times (NYT) in Beijing.

Perlez was asked in 2012 to transfer from Pakistan to Beijing after a 31-year career at the NYT, reporting respectively from East Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This was not her first time to be in Beijing. Her first time was much earlier than even President Richard Nixon’s visit in 1972, when she was a student at the Australian National University in 1967. She witnessed China’s Cultural Revolution for three weeks, a rare experience for any westerner.

Perlez recalled Xi’s visit to Washington in February 2012 when he was China’s Vice President. She juxtaposed the buoyant atmosphere in the State Department, where Xi received a warm welcome, and the hopeful impression that Americans felt from Xi’s subsequent visit to Iowa and Los Angles in the same trip, with Xi’s record since November 2012. Americans thought in 2012 that they could do business with Xi, that he would bring more dynamism to the Chinese top leadership than his predecessor Hu Jintao, and that Xi would resemble his father as an economic reformer who made a soaring return to power in the 1980s after being purged in the Cultural Revolution.

However, Xi soon began to show his authoritarian streak. In December 2012, he signaled in a speech that he would not be China’s Mikhail Gorbachev, under whose leadership and reform programs the Soviet Union dissolved. In 2013, Xi’s team quickly cracked down on the internet and limited the space for free speech. Then the infamous Document No. 9 was promulgated, forbidding discussions on seven topics, including western constitutionalism and civil liberties. In 2014, Lu Wei, one of Xi’s close allies and Xi’s appointed czar of the internet, established internet sovereignty and Party control over China’s burgeoning internet industry, refusing interference from abroad. He accompanied Xi in his 2015 U.S. trip, introducing American business tycoons to Xi, including Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. Who could have anticipated that he would soon fall from grace in 2017 in the mist of Xi’s forceful anti-corruption campaign?
In the fall of 2013, Xi announced a Silk Road Project, which later became the more ambitious and comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ostensibly linking China with Euro-Asia and parts of Africa through massive infrastructure projects but embedding an attempt to challenge western influence and mainstream ideology in these regions. Meanwhile, China began to build artificial islands with some military capacities in the South China Sea. To further project power abroad, China initiated the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which Washington feared would undermine the authority and the scope of the World Bank and tried to persuade its allies around the world not to join. The AIIB has so far operated in a fairly transparent and cooperative manner with several U.S. allies as members.

Then Xi’s economic team launched the “Made in China 2025” program, which is a blueprint to boost mostly high-tech industries of the 21st century, such as, semiconductors, artificial intelligence and robotics, with enormous state subsidies and support. This trend of increasing authoritarianism at home and projecting power overseas culminated in the abolition of the two-term limit for the Chinese presidency in March 2018. This major change of the constitution caused considerable consternation not only abroad but also domestically. Perlez reported that even a Chinese university professor who had been a staunch supporter of Xi was shocked at the news and declined to be interviewed.

Perlez then recounted a series of reporting experiences in China. After the 2008 Olympics Games in Beijing, foreign journalists in principle have the freedom of traveling anywhere in China. However, in practice, they have to deal with a great deal of harassment. When Perlez went to Dandong, a Chinese town bordering North Korea, with her NYT colleague to investigate how sanctions against North Korea were undermined, they quickly realized that they had been followed around and could not obtain unhindered interviews.

It is more difficult for foreign journalists to report from Xinjiang, where over a million Muslims are detained in “re-education camps.” Effectively exploiting the vacuum in the United Nations Human Rights Council left by the Trump administration’s withdrawal in June 2018, China wants the world to remain silent about these camps. With tremendous Chinese investment and business in the Central Asian countries bordering Xinjiang, those Muslim countries don’t really stand up for the Uyghurs in China despite their religious and cultural affinity.

In March 2018, as soon as the NYT published reporter Chris Buckley’s article, “How Xi Jinping made his power grab: with stealth, speed, and guile,” Perlez and Buckley were summoned by the Foreign Ministry and warned for having “crossed the line;” the degree of their criticism of Chinese leaders was not acceptable. In May 2019, the departure of Liu Wanyong, an investigative journalist of more than two decades, from the China Youth Daily is widely taken as a symbol of the death of Chinese investigative journalism.

In short, foreign journalists in China have had to confront increased pressure in recent years; they are presumed to be spies in disguise. Should the U.S. reciprocate the Chinese way in treating Chinese journalists in the U.S., such as, circumscribing the Washington-based CCTV’s freedom
in its reporting activities? Watching President Trump answering five questions from five Chinese journalists in Hanoi, Vietnam after his meeting with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un in February 2019, as well as taking a question from a Chinese journalist in the Oval Office after the breakdown of the Sino-U.S. trade negotiations in May 2019, Perlez has come around to the conclusion that, instead of duplicating the Chinese way, the U.S. should show Chinese journalists how an open and democratic system really works. It is mutually beneficial to do so.