

COMMENT

LI YANG

Even subversion is a rights issue for Western media

Hu Shigen, a former college teacher in Beijing, was convicted of subversion and sentenced to seven years and six months in prison by a Tianjin court on Wednesday. Admitting his guilt, Hu said the trial was just and fair and thanked the authorities for making sure he was properly treated for his diseases.

Convicted of a similar crime in 1994, Hu was given a 20-year sentence. He was released in 2008 after his sentence was reduced.

Hu's trial was not only open to more than 40 people from various walks of life, including foreign correspondents, but also broadcast live through videos to journalists at a temporary press center in a hotel near the court. The court also provided timely updates on the progress of the case through social media.

Yet some foreign media outlets have termed the court verdict a "crackdown" on a human rights activist.

According to Hu's confession and the court's statement, he teamed up with some lawyers to embarrass the government over some "sensitive issues" in order to garner more people's support for his "peaceful transformation" theory and overthrow the country's leadership.

Also, he assigned his accomplices to participate in conventions and training programs of exiled separatists from the

Xinjiang and Tibet autonomous regions, as well as some Western countries to ensure the "smooth reorganization" of the country in the future through "a color revolution".

Still, most Western media outlets describe Hu and his colleagues as "government critics" and "people who dared to challenge the Party".

No, Hu's moves were not about human rights, they were about compromising state security and stability. China has many government critics, and the government has never stopped learning from their constructive criticisms. That's an important reason why China has solved one problem after another during its peaceful rise.

In contrast, the countries that experienced or were forced to undergo "color revolutions" a few years ago — a phenomenon the West zealously praised — are suffering from public unrest and chaos today.

Like any other country, China has every reason to deal with the grave crime of subversion in accordance with the law. And it is China's internal matter which no outside force has the right to interfere in.

A Western news agency even said, "Zhai (an accomplice of Hu) was on Tuesday handed a three-year suspended sentence ... for crimes that included waving banners and shouting slogans." Such out-of-context reporting is irresponsible, because they deliberately focused on things like "waving banners and shouting slogans" without



ZHAI HAIJUN/ CHINA DAILY

considering the case in its entirety.

In fact, some Western reporters didn't even bother to go to the news center in the hotel near the court, because they assumed they would not get any "valuable information" there. They sent their Chinese assistants, instead, to follow the live broadcast while they were chatting leisurely in the

lobby. Only after the assistants told them that information in plenty was available there did they go to the news center.

Given that they had to travel to Tianjin to cover the case, it is not difficult to imagine how much more imagination and assump-

tion they would have inserted in their reports had their assistants not warned them about the facts.

The author is a writer with China Daily. liyang@chinadaily.com.cn

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN

Candid thoughts on South China Sea disputes

Some foreign analysts call Beijing's rejection of the recent arbitral tribunal ruling in the South China Sea dispute "China's first international test" as an emerging power. Some foreign media wonder whether a resurgent China will uphold the international order. Will fears of a "China threat" now increase?

Underlying all these issues is what China calls its "core interests". What are China's core interests? Do they include the "dotted line" (often called the "Nine-Dash Line"), which defines China's claim of sovereignty in the South China Sea?

These matters are sufficiently serious to warrant a sophisticated understanding of China's position. What are China's claims and arguments? What will happen now?

To understand China's position and way of thinking, I sat down for a two-hour, in-depth discussion with General Peng Guangqian, a People's Liberation Army major general and military strategist; he is deputy secretary-general of China's National Security Forum and has been focusing on South China Sea issues.

The ground rules were simple: I would ask Peng the tough questions. Peng told me he would answer my questions directly and candidly, stressing that he would express his own personal ideas; he was not representing official positions of the Chinese government or the PLA. I was impressed by his knowledge and candor. To me, the issue is not so much who is right and who is wrong — human groups often disagree — but rather recognizing that only through open and honest communication can misunderstandings be minimized and inadvertent confrontations avoided.

Sovereignty and core interests

While the ruling did not determine sovereignty — because the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea cannot rule on sovereignty — it did seek to adjudicate territorial and economic zones from maritime features such as islands, rocks and reefs. China asserts this is a distinction without a difference, in that sovereignty is indeed the underlying issue and therefore the tribunal did not have jurisdiction, and China is not about to bargain away its sovereignty. Thus my first question to Peng.

"Why was the ruling so unfavorable to China, especially given that the tribunal said it was not addressing issues of sovereignty, which was not in its jurisdiction?"

"The Philippines and the arbitral tribunal played a trick," Peng said. "They disguised the territorial entitlement of the disputed islands and reefs as well as the maritime rights and interests as an interpretation of the UNCLOS ... The South China Sea issue is the first 'test' for China on the path of the great rejuvenation of the nation. We should adhere to our principles and express our solemn position

to the international community."

"Is the South China Sea a 'core interest' of China's sovereignty on par with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang?" I asked.

"Let me give you a metaphor," Peng responded. "All human beings have 10 fingers. As a Chinese saying goes, the nerves of the fingertips are linked with the heart, which means every finger is closely bound up with one's whole life and we cannot cut off any finger. We attach equal importance to Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, Hainan ... Any part of China is an indispensable 'core interest' for China's survival and development. It's a reality that some of our islands and waters have been occupied by other countries and China's resources have been plundered. We have every confidence of recovering them. But we still advocate a peaceful settlement through negotiation and consultation. Before this issue is settled, we can shelve differences and seek joint development, which fully demonstrates our sincerity. But there is no doubt that the South China Sea is very much a part of China's 'core interests'."

China's claims — the dotted line

"From the perspective of foreigners, the 'dotted line' looks aggressive, even imperialistic," I said, "in that it encompasses the vast majority of the South China Sea, extending more than 1,000 kilometers from the Chinese mainland and coming within a few dozen kilometers of the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia."

Peng was philosophical.

"For several thousand years, China had fought with winds and waves, pirates and invaders, in the South China Sea. This is our family property that we have earned; it is the heritage created by our ancestors.

"It is our territory not because we are closer to it," he continued. "Territorial sovereignty does not depend on distance. Consider Guam; it is closer to Asia, yet belongs to the US. The Malvinas (Falkland Islands) are close to Argentina, very far from Britain. Why then did Britain go there to fight a war? ... The ownership of islands is not identified by distance; many historical and other factors affect it."

I had a joke that, not wanting to offend, I was reluctant to tell. But Peng's sincere mix of openness and confidence relaxed my inhibitions. "There is a joke that in Vietnam and the Philippines no one is allowed to go swimming in the ocean, because if you start to swim, you invade China's territory."

"I tell you the truth," Peng responded, all business. "I begin with Vietnam. On Sept 14, 1956, the then prime minister of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, sent a formal note to our premier, Zhou Enlai, stating that Vietnam firmly agreed and supported China's statement on the breadth of China's territorial sea, which included coastlines and



General Peng Guangqian, deputy secretary-general of China's National Security Forum
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United States declarations

I decided to repeat US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's assertion: "Now, make no mistake: The United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do around the world, and the South China Sea is not and will not be an exception."

Peng was not intimidated. "The truth is that the 'Free Navigation Plan' of the United States began as early as 1979, before the launch of the UNCLOS, and it is a kind of rebellion and boycott against the law. The US alleges that it is not subject to the UNCLOS; it enjoys the freedom to sail in all the waters of the world, and not a single law can restrict it. The US travels the seven continents and four oceans. It suggests that the US does not respect, even despises, international law and the UNCLOS."

"So what will China do?" I asked a bit provocatively.

"We will stand firmly against it; we will make proper response in accordance with the provisions of international law; we will react according to the existing consensus that every country recognizes. For example, if we detect a US vessel entering our monitored area, we will expel it. If you violate our sovereignty, get into our airspace or territorial sea, then it can be interpreted as a violation of our core interest. Suppose China enters Chesapeake Bay (Virginia and Maryland) in the US, or within 12 nautical miles of US territorial waters, how will the US react? We will react the same way."

"Is China prepared for military confrontation?" Everything is now on the table.

"To protect our core interests," Peng said, "China is prepared for war. China's stance on the South China Sea has become clear and resolute. Yet the Chinese government, taking stability and peace in Northeast Asia and the Northwest Pacific as its high priority, has not given a clear response as to whether it will safeguard these core interests by force."

What refreshing clarity and candor!

islands. As for the Philippines, a series of treaties and the Philippines Constitution indicate the sea area of the Philippines is bounded within 119 degrees east longitude. Never did it say the area to the west of this boundary was its territory."

My next question was obvious: "Is China prepared militarily?"

Peng's answer was thoughtful. "The premise behind what you said is important: only when there is no way out for us will we be forced to do what we have to do. We will not make the first move. We will not use our power to bully others. That will not happen. But if you are driving me into a dead end (corner), we will definitely fight back. But in terms of our capability to counter, I think that depends on whom we are compared with. If with the US, then our naval force is definitely weaker. The US has 10 carrier battle groups. The capability of one US carrier battle group is equivalent to several of ours, and we only have one carrier battle group. In the future, we may establish two or three more of them. Even though we are far behind the US, I think our current naval power is sufficient for us to defend our territorial sea rights. We are confident of that."

Can China and US avoid collision?

It was time for Peng's overarching philosophy of China-US relations. "You have written eloquently how the US and China can avoid the so-called Thucydides trap, where the rise of a new power usually ends up in war with the existing power."

Peng was pleased to present his grand vision. "What I want to stress is that while China and the US are indeed a developing power and a developed power, this does not necessarily mean that these two countries will finish on the path of head-on collision. They can transcend the trap of collision, too often repeated in human history. I have two theories. First, China is not an 'emerging power' because China is a big country with a 5,000-year civilization. These two great powers definitely have different historical backgrounds, but that doesn't mean they will collide. Why? Because in history, the rising power and the ruling power had divided or mutually contradictory interests. However, nowadays, the interests of China and the US are increasingly interdependent, mutually linked to each other. The second reason is that with military power today, no one, except lunatics, would wage unlimited, mutually fatal wars. I am confident that China and the US will avoid the trap."

After speaking with Peng, I reflected on what he had said. I'm told here in China, at all levels, that the country's peaceful rise will not change; conflicts are temporary. China has a massive stake in upholding the international order. Of all major economies, China is most dependent on global trade for which maritime stability is essential. That said, after a century of national humiliation when China's sovereignty was trampled repeatedly and wantonly, China today is not about to compromise its national rights.

Can China make a legitimate case in its historic claims in the South China Sea? Of course it can. But all claimants claim the same. That's the nature of border disputes everywhere in the world.

Personally, I believe the wealth of nations in the 21st century is more the generation of knowledge than the ownership of rocks, but I cannot deny that sovereignty is among the most basic and emotional of human group instincts.

Maritime boundaries, like national borders, were not dictated by God or set by the Big Bang when the universe began.

We must deal with current realities. To appreciate China's position does not mean agreeing with it. It does mean that to manage our world it is vital to understand opposing views — and this means understanding China's.

No party benefits from a blowup. In a globalized world, China and the US will flourish together or flounder together. A temporary solution is simply to maintain the status quo, let time work its magic. Candid communication is vital. That's why I appreciate General Peng, my new friend.

This interview with General Peng Guangqian is excerpted from Closer To China with R.L.Kuhn on CCTV News.

The author is a public intellectual, political/economics commentator, and international corporate strategist. He is the host of Closer To China with R.L. Kuhn on CCTV News.

CONTACT US

China Daily
15 Huixin Dongjie Chaoyang, Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366; editor@chinadaily.com.cn

Subscription: +86 400-699-0203; subscribe@chinadaily.com.cn

Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631; ads@chinadaily.com.cn

Phone app: chinadaily.com.cn/iphone

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800, New York, NY 10036 +1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Room 1818, Hing Wai Centre 7 Tin Wan Praya Road Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2518 5111
editor@chinadailyhk.com

China Daily UK
90 Cannon Street London EC4N 6HA
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Africa
P.O.Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 522 3498 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com