

# HUMAN RIGHTS, CHINA AND 21ST-CENTURY DIPLOMACY

DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINA OFFER NEW  
OPPORTUNITIES TO REFRAME OUR APPROACH  
TO BILATERAL DISCUSSIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS.

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*By MICHAEL H. POSNER*

**A**s U.S. diplomacy rebalances toward Asia, China is playing an increasingly large role in every sphere. It is now our largest trading partner outside of North America. China is an important partner in addressing regional and global security issues, from North Korea to Iran to Syria. Beijing's decisions and the character of the U.S.-China relationship are critical to our prospects for success in tackling global challenges, ranging from nonproliferation to climate change to the future of the Internet.

As China's role on the global stage has grown, the United States has underscored the importance of China playing by international rules, norms and universal principles. Human rights is no exception. Indeed, protection of human rights is an important national interest, in addition to a moral one. China's future stability and its value as a long-term partner will depend on its government's will and capacity to meet the aspirations of its 1.3 billion citizens. Therefore, the United States has integrated human rights as a central element of our diplomacy.

While we maintain a longstanding commitment to uni-

versal rights, we have opportunities to do what we do differently than we have in the past. Rapid changes within Chinese society and the growing demands by ordinary Chinese citizens for reform offer new opportunities for the United States to reframe the emphasis of, and approach to, our bilateral discussions of human rights.

Human rights has long been an issue in U.S.-China relations. From Tibet to Tiananmen Square, from the Cultural Revolution to the one-child policy, and with regard to specific dissident cases, human rights issues in China have stirred passionate feelings on both sides of the Pacific. Many Americans are harshly critical of the Chinese government's persecution of dissidents and its one-child policy, while some Chinese are angered by what they see as an effort to judge their country as part of some broader effort to foment instability in China and to bring about the demise of the Communist Party.

But we believe that engaging on all issues, including ones where we have differences, is part of building a strong U.S.-China relationship — as well as a more stable and prosperous China. The State Department has engaged with the candor and pragmatism that arise from the conviction that progress on realizing universal rights and the rule of law advances the national interests of both nations

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and helps to build a more mature bilateral relationship.

### **Economic Success, Political Lag**

Our dialogue must begin with a clear-eyed assessment of what is happening in China today. The country's spectacular economic growth over the last 30 years has lifted an estimated 600 million people out of poverty. China has become the global epicenter of manufacturing, producing not only apparel and toys but also cars, cell phones and iPads.

Last year, U.S. trade in goods and services with China exceeded \$500 billion. With hundreds of millions of increasingly wealthy consumers, China is a prime market for companies from around the world.

Chinese society, too, has changed, as the inward focus of the last century has been replaced by an increasingly international outlook. Chinese tourists and investors roam the world, and more than 330,000 Chinese students are studying abroad, some 150,000 of them in the United States.

Chinese citizens are wired: More than half a billion of them have Internet access, a penetration rate of about 38 percent. One in five global Internet users is Chinese.

They are connected: There were more than a billion Chinese mobile phone subscribers in a population of about 1.3 billion. And they are on the move: More than half of

all Chinese now live in urban areas, creating a web of new cities on what was farmland three decades ago.

Yet China's economic transformation has not been matched by progress on political reform, democratic development, and the government and party's respect for human rights and the rule of law. If we consider some of the characteristics experts prioritize for successful developing nations — transparency, accountability, the rule of law, a strong civil society, a free press, Internet freedom, freedom of religion, free and fair elections, and independent unions — none of these is fully present in China. (Though it isn't a candidate, it is still striking that the world's second-largest economy would not qualify as a partner under the publicly available Millennium Challenge Corporation criteria, which require that a country "demonstrate a commitment to just and democratic governance, investments in its people, and economic freedom as measured by different policy indicators.")

Chinese Communist Party officials are publicly reluctant to accept any linkage between democratization, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and the ability to cope with change (and thereby preserve stability) that generally characterizes the world's democratic nations. If anything, China's economic success blunts the impetus for top-down

### **Making Common Cause**

**T**hirty-five years after DRL's creation, we enjoy close, mature partnerships with the regional bureaus. We must. We share a common charge from the president to encourage governments to respect human rights and democracy. It is in our national interest to do so.

Start with Burma. Two years ago, led by Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, the administration started new diplomatic engagement with Burma's military regime. President Thein Sein took the first steps toward reforming Burma's repressive political system. In response, DRL and EAP worked together to adapt our policy to ensure that principled engagement achieved human rights results, and rewarded the regime for positive change, while keeping on pressure to halt abuses and promote further reforms.

DRL and EAP's tight cooperation has already played a part in real results: hundreds of political prisoners released, Aung San Suu Kyi free and in parliament, and authorization for U.S. investment accompanied by reporting requirements to ensure transparency.

All around the world, DRL and the regional bureaus take advantage of differing contact networks, expertise and organizational focus to create practical, on-the-ground outcomes. DRL's collaboration with NEA is encouraging Bahrain's monarchy toward national reconciliation and dialogue with the opposition, while in Tunisia we have arranged mediation training to reduce and manage strikes disrupting the Tunisian economy.

Our Internet Freedom and Programming teams work with the regional bureaus to finance and spread secure communication technologies that help human rights defenders escape surveillance and detection, and allow citizens access to the open Internet. And together with EUR, we coordinate with partners in the European Union on human rights challenges from North Africa to North Korea, from Belarus to Burma.

To paraphrase President Obama, governments that respect human rights and democracy are more just, peaceful and legitimate. Their success fosters an environment that supports America's national interests. That success is our common cause.

— *Michael H. Posner*

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democratic reform, even while political soul-searching takes place over such issues as corruption.

China has made efforts in recent years to leverage political influence overseas to limit criticism of its human rights record. Beijing is a major aid donor in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, sits on the United Nations Human Rights Council, and is courted for its diplomatic support on issues ranging from Sudan to Syria.

Yet China's economic model is not as widely admired as it was several years ago. It has become apparent that China's rapid economic growth absent political modernization has created multiple stressors. These include corruption, income inequality, lack of protections for a vast and growing population of migrant workers, environmental degradation, consumer safety issues and labor unrest.

Moreover, the huge leap in living standards has gener-

***Societies change from within, and the nature of that change is in the hands of the Chinese people.***

ated rising expectations. While economic growth has happened without political reform, sustaining a modern economy without modern, rights-respecting rule of law is looking increasingly challenging.

### **Calls for Change**

These social pressures are expressed in the large number of citizen protests that have taken place around the country in recent years. These spontaneous, sometimes violent protests are organized by ordinary Chinese citizens over a wide range of issues that mainly concern the quality of everyday life: land disputes, abuse of power by local officials, environmental threats, labor unrest and food safety.

While some Chinese officials believe that they can continue to walk the path of economic growth without political liberalization, others are clearly grappling with how to answer these growing demands for change from their citi-



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zens. The Chinese people are rightfully proud of their nation's accomplishments, but many young people, particularly the "Post-90s Generation" (those who were born after 1990, and so were not alive for the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown), do not equate the expression of discontent with government performance with a threat to national pride.

A sense of pervasive unfairness in the system and demands for political openness, less corruption, and more accountability come not only from less privileged Chinese youth and workers, but also from members of the urban elite, who are increasingly rich, well-educated and wired. Although there are no publicly available official figures for the number of Chinese strikes and protests each year, non-governmental groups estimate there were about 30,000 collective protests by workers during 2011, including wildcat strikes in the Pearl River delta.

Younger Chinese workers tend to organize these strikes to contest wages, demand improvements in health and safety, protest the mistreatment of migrant workers or address other workplace issues. Despite government attempts to stop them, and the fact that independent unions are illegal, the strikes continue.

The State Department engages on labor issues with Chinese officials at a variety of levels, and we work and exchange ideas with labor activists who understand that China's transition to a modern industrial relations system that permits collective bargaining and independent unions will promote better conditions for workers and greater social stability, avoid the economic disruptions caused by frequent strikes and help to build the new middle-class consumers that can drive China's economy.

By stressing this connection between improvements in human rights and the interests of the Chinese government in fostering social stability, we have sought to build bridges and trust with Chinese officials and Chinese workers. We offer diplomatic support for labor reform where appropriate, and technical expertise where desired.

### **Jumping the "Great Firewall"**

The Chinese government has responded to the advent of the Internet and other new communication technologies by attempting to control the content available online. But here as well, while China is a controlled system, it is not a monolith. The "Great Firewall" continues to filter the Internet in China and local censors troll the Web deleting millions of pages and posts; yet the Post-90s Genera-

tion and many other Chinese citizens have learned how to "jump the wall" to access blocked content and share it.

With bipartisan support from Congress, the State Department and USAID have spent or committed \$100 million to promote Internet freedom around the world.

While media reporting about political strife or the cases of dissidents is strictly limited, reporting on "quality of life" issues, such as land and labor rights, is now widespread (except in Tibetan areas and Xinjiang, where much more stringent controls on information are the norm). Citizen reporting, including tough criticism of the government, permeates the Internet in China and drives social media sites, despite the government's exhaustive efforts to delete it. A recent Harvard University study concluded that Chinese censorship is now primarily directed toward thwarting collective action, not suppressing criticism of the state, its policies or even its leaders.

Ordinary Chinese citizens are using the Internet to improve their lives in myriad ways, from building businesses and taking online courses to connecting with far-flung family members. A significant number are also struggling against censorship and protesting the lack of a say in the way they are governed. And in some cases, they prevail.

In early July, mass protests in the city of Shifang in southwestern China forced the local government to halt its approval of plans to construct a \$1.6 billion copper plant because of pollution fears. On Weibo, a major Chinese microblogging Web site with more than 300 million registered users, photos showed clouds of tear gas fired at demonstrators, and citizens reported that riot police had fired stun grenades in an attempt to disperse a crowd reported to number in the tens of thousands. Chinese reporters were reportedly blocked from entering the city, and the official media did not run accounts of the July 3 announcement by the Shifang local government that it would halt the copper-smelting project.

Nevertheless, news, images and video spread rapidly on Weibo, even after "Shifang" abruptly disappeared from the list of frequently searched terms. Several media outlets reported that high school and university students had been the initial driving force behind the movement to halt construction of the factory, prompting a state-run newspaper to editorialize that high school students should stay out of politics and study.

The Shifang incident follows a number of other cases in which Chinese citizens have challenged local officials — with varying degrees of success — on a range of issues. In

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Wenzhou, citizens demanded an official investigation of a July 2011 high-speed train crash that killed some 40 people. And in Dalian, residents organized daily protests outside a chemical plant to spotlight fears that the paraxylene produced there would spill and endanger the surrounding communities.

### **An Opening for Food Diplomacy**

Food safety also continues to be a flashpoint. Public outrage following a tainted-milk scandal in 2008 led to sweeping government attempts to improve food safety controls. In June, infant formula manufactured by a Chinese company was found to contain high levels of mercury; but in a sign of

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progress, this time the contamination was discovered and announced by China's product quality watchdog, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine.

In the past, Internet searches on terms such as "tainted milk" were shut down, and the father of a child who died from drinking tainted milk was jailed for his food safety activism. But increasingly, the Chinese media are permitted to report on the ongoing battle to control rogue food manufacturers.

In March, for example, the *China Daily* newspaper ran a report about contaminated peas. And in May, the state-run news agency Xinhua revealed that it was common practice for vegetable sellers to spray their cabbages with

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formaldehyde, a carcinogen, because few can afford refrigeration.

With the Chinese people now ranking food safety as a top priority, this concern provides an opening for engaging the government on productive responses to citizen concerns.

Corruption is an even more sensitive topic, one that touches almost every person in China. In general, Chinese authorities have portrayed it as a purely local problem, but recent news stories have offered an intriguing window into the dealings of senior government officials and their families.

It is notable that in some cases, Chinese national authorities have sided with rural citizens who have protested — even violently — illicit land seizures and other excesses by local authorities. This spring, democratic elections were

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held in the village of Wukan, three months after villagers blockaded themselves to protest what they claimed was the illegal sale of their land to property developers by local officials.

As in the standoff in Shifang, the granting of elections in Wukan was seen as a rare concession by the Communist Party, and it is unclear whether the lesson of Wukan will be implemented elsewhere in China.

### **The Rules Apply to Everyone**

As we look toward a future in which both the United States and China have an enhanced interest in closer cooperation, U.S. expressions of concern over events in China need to be based on universal human rights principles that apply to every nation, including our own.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stressed this theme in a July 9 speech in Mongolia, where she argued that the transformation of that nation from “a one-party communist dictatorship into a pluralistic, democratic political system” challenges the notion that “freedom and democracy are exclusively Western concepts.”

The U.S.-China relationship is mature, multifaceted and resilient. We are able to cooperate on a range of issues that are important to both countries, as our most recent Strategic and Economic Dialogue demonstrated, and those issues include human rights.

As we continue to move past stilted talking points and pursue real progress, the topics we choose to raise with Beijing should amplify Chinese voices for reform. We must focus on the issues that matter the most to Chinese citizens and where American moral, diplomatic or technical support can most help Chinese activists.

We must also be mindful that societies change from within, and the nature of that change is in the hands of the Chinese people. It will not be dictated by the United States, nor should it be. But as Secretary Clinton has said, “Fundamentally, there is a right side of history. And we want to be on it.”

For that reason, the United States must continue to support the many courageous Chinese citizens who are demanding that their human rights be respected. We need to stand with them as they build the stronger, freer, more rights-respecting society that they deserve. ■



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