

2009 Marks Essay Submission

Introduction

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre of student demonstrators in China, and the subject of human rights has once again been raised in debates about the U.S. relationship with China. Human rights groups are calling for President Obama to take a tough stance against China's limits on individual freedoms and alleged human rights abuses. At the same time, the United States is seeking to strengthen its ties to China in order to address a multitude of global challenges.

As the Obama administration sets an agenda to guide its relations with China over the next four years its focus should be on maintaining open lines of communication and cooperation with Beijing on issues critical to international security. More than anything else the Chinese regime fears political instability, and American efforts to promote human rights in China are perceived by the Chinese leadership as attempts to undermine the ruling party's authority. Putting human rights near the top of the U.S. agenda with China would jeopardize the potential for cooperation on more immediate and pressing issues that will have a direct impact on U.S. interests.

The Need for U.S.-Sino Cooperation

The United States currently faces three key international challenges in which Chinese cooperation is critical for a successful response: North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, the global economic crisis, and climate change.

Despite the failings of the Six Party Talks, the U.S. will continue to depend on China to play a key role in addressing North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. China is not only North Korea's neighbor and an influential player in the region, but also a historic provider of aid to Kim Jong Il's regime. If the U.S. pursues military action it will want Chinese support beforehand to avoid creating greater tension in the broader region. Should the U.S. seek a diplomatic solution, Chinese cooperation will be even more critical to a successful outcome given its closer ties to North Korea.

A second challenge that requires significant American coordination with China is the current global financial crisis. China is not only the world's third largest economy in terms of gross domestic product; it is also a major holder of U.S. debt. Cooperation between the two countries is critical to reestablishing global financial stability and economic recovery. Moreover, progress in the areas of monetary and trade policies will be important for the long-term health of the American economy.

The third and perhaps most important challenge for the U.S. to achieve Chinese cooperation on is climate change. This year China will surpass the U.S. as

the largest emitter of carbon dioxide -- the leading gas associated with global warming. The level of emissions reductions needed to slow climate change cannot be reached without the participation of China in an international regime. With the demand for electricity in China expected to triple from 2006 to 2030, any emissions reduction effort will need to be coupled with encouragement of the adoption of alternative forms of energy. As the two largest emitters of carbon dioxide, the U.S. and China share many of the same concerns about the establishment of an international regime to monitor and regulate carbon emissions. These common concerns should form the basis for engagement on the issue.

Beyond these three immediate challenges, strong Sino-American relations will have the added benefit of promoting stability in East Asia and will increase the capacity of the U.S. and China to work together to meet future challenges.

Addressing Human Rights in China

Despite the many opportunities for cooperation between the U.S. and China, differing views on human rights remain a very real point of contention in this relationship. Concerns center around limits on freedom of speech, lack of religious freedom, harsh treatment of ethnic groups associated with separatist movements in regions like Tibet and Xinjiang, and an unfair judicial system. U.S.-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and prominent U.S. leaders such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi have been vocal critics of the Chinese human rights record.

However, given the need for Chinese cooperation on several other critical issues, it would be unwise for the U.S. to put human rights at the top of its agenda with China at this time. The American promotion of human rights in China is perceived by the Chinese leadership as meddling in its domestic affairs and an attempt to undermine the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Previous U.S. government efforts to address human rights issues in China have proven counterproductive, tainting the groups that receive U.S. support and straining the overall Sino-American relationship.

Therefore, high-level administration officials should refrain from publicly pushing a human rights agenda, and avoid rhetoric targeted towards the Chinese population, for it risks alienating a crucial security partner. This more restrained approach was demonstrated successfully by Secretary of State Clinton on her first official visit to China earlier this year. While members of Congress and NGOs will play important roles as human rights watchdogs, the Obama administration must be seen as independent of these groups and their views in order to maintain its credibility with the Chinese leadership.

Instead, the Obama administration should adopt a more indirect approach to human rights promotion. Significant progress on human rights can be made through cooperation on other issues that will have the effect of encouraging greater

freedoms. Continued economic growth is one such issue; the rapidly growing Chinese economy has produced a large and expanding middle class, one of the necessary cornerstones of a healthy civil society. Moreover, economic incentives are also promoting the expansion of rights in China as in the case of the government's encouragement of the media to cover corruption at the local level, and the recent broadening of land use rights.

Additionally, political momentum within China is also trending towards the expansion of individual freedoms. Currently the CCP is facing a massive crisis of political legitimacy as China transitions from communism towards a socialist market economy. No longer can the Party count on ideology to maintain its popularity. Consequently, the government needs to be seen as addressing the needs of its people; in other words, the CCP wants to achieve levels of popularity and effectiveness sufficient to maintaining its control of the government. Premier Wen Jibao has even gone so far as to suggest the introduction of democratic ideas within the CCP as part of political reform. Perhaps the most effective promoter of rights within China may one day turn out to be the CCP itself. The U.S. should be supportive of such reforms, while recognizing that Chinese democracy is likely to look very different from American democracy. Academic exchanges and joint conferences on good governance are a couple of ways in which the U.S. can support this political reform in China without being seen as interfering.

Conclusion

In establishing an agenda to guide its relationship with China over the next four years, the Obama administration should use two key criteria in prioritizing the issues it takes up with the Chinese government: whether they have a direct bearing on U.S. economic and security interests, and whether progress can realistically be expected based on room for negotiation. Today three major challenges meet those criteria: a nuclear armed North Korea, the global economic crisis, and climate change. Unfortunately, concerns over human rights currently do not meet this threshold since the Chinese have signaled they do not believe the U.S. has a role to play on this issue. It is therefore important that the U.S. focus on those issues the Chinese are willing cooperate on in order to maintain an open dialogue and strengthen the working relationship between the two countries.

This does not, however, mean that the human rights agenda will stagnate over the next four years. Rights and freedoms in China are likely to continue to improve without direct U.S. involvement. The CCP has recognized that it must adapt and change in order to maintain its relevance and legitimacy as the ruling party in China. The U.S. can and should support the CCP's political reform efforts. Additionally, broader U.S. cooperation with China on other issues, such as economic growth, can indirectly have the desired effects of expanding freedoms,

while avoiding the confrontations that would prevent progress on other, more pressing issues.