

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing on
Tiananmen at 35—the Ongoing Struggle for Human Rights and
Democracy in China

Tuesday, June 4, 2024, 10:30 am

2118 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Senator **Jeff Merkley**, Cochair

As delivered

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Today being June 4, this is an appropriate day for a hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China because of the focus on the events of June 3-4, 1989, at Tiananmen Square, and in cities across China. Those events shocked the conscience of the world, and the conscience of this Congress.

The massacre of peaceful protestors by their own government spurred a decade of debate here in Congress about whether the United States should condition trade relations with China on improvements in human rights.

Our chairman, Congressman Smith, was at the forefront of those bipartisan debates, along with Speaker Emerita Pelosi.

That question was settled in 2000 when Congress and President Clinton granted permanent normal trade relations to the People's Republic of China. Congress insisted, however, that the deal include a mechanism to monitor China's progress on human rights and rule of law. That insistence and that legislation created this Commission, a bicameral, bipartisan watchdog to assess China's behavior against international human rights standards.

But today's hearing is not about this Commission.

It is about the people in the People's Republic of China, the oppression they continue to endure, the hopes that they continue to hold for a better future, the aspirations they continue to fight for.

The people gathered in Tiananmen Square in the spring of 1989 were demanding their government respond to their grievances as well as their aspirations.

The government's brutal response ended lives and ended optimism that day. But it did not end the desire for freedom and the desire for dignity.

Those feelings are universal and innate to every human everywhere. It is a spark that cannot be extinguished.

Thirty-five years later, that brutal grip of oppression has only tightened. People cannot openly express dissent.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about whether and how the citizens of the PRC find ways to share their frustrations and desires. Do they use social media, chat groups, informal networks? What can the 2022 White Paper protests tell us?

I also hope to hear how we, American policymakers, can best understand what people in China are saying, what they are feeling, what they are advocating for. It is vital that we listen to their voices rather than project our own ideas or politics.

I am interested to learn how people keep alive the legacy of Tiananmen in the face of a concerted and successful effort by the CCP to erase the history, both on the mainland and now in Hong Kong. Preservation of memory is another innate human impulse, essential to people's ability to maintain their culture and maintain their identity.

Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are core human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Chinese government's relentless effort to suppress them does not diminish the yearning of the people of China to realize them.

Or our responsibility to speak out for them. That is why we are here.

I look forward to your testimony.