



Dissidents Who Have Suffered for Human Rights in China: A Look Back and A Look Forward

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This has been another dark and difficult year for Chinese rights defenders and democracy activists. Under President Xi Jinping's version of the rule by law, the law is being used to more severely curb the freedom of expression, civil society, religious freedom, and other fundamental rights.

Chinese courts have convicted rights activists and lawyers of "subversion of state power" for simply seeking to represent religious groups, petitioners, and democracy advocates.

China's diverse religious communities faced even more restrictions, as new regulations, and a "sinicization" campaign, will further politicize religious life and lead to more repression.

In Hong Kong, mainland China's political interference and its abduction of booksellers threatens the rule of law and Hong Kong's promised autonomy, contributing to a growing climate of insecurity.

Internationally, China continues to push a relativistic version of human rights, characterizing universal values as "Western" values that do not apply to China's national situation.

The next Administration faces major challenges in dealing with China. A new approach is needed that learns the lessons of the past and listens to those who have suffered prison and persecution to advance fundamental freedoms in China.

The problem is that U.S. diplomacy is stuck with policies that no longer match Chinese realities. For the past two decades, U.S. policy was based on the belief that

China's growing prosperity would bring political reforms and the rule of law. We focused on integrating China into the international system, ignoring clear evidence that China, under the Communist Party's leadership, would play by its own rules.

China has not become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system as predicted. Quite the contrary, despite decades of remarkable economic growth, Beijing's leaders are increasingly dismissive of "Western influence" and hostile to both free societies and democratic capitalism.

A strategy of engagement through trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges has not led to a freer China and remains cold comfort to China's repressed human rights lawyers, religious and ethnic minority groups, journalists, and civil society leaders.

The U.S. must recognize that China's internal repression drives its external aggression and develop new policy approaches that intertwine our principles and interests in the pivotal Asia-Pacific region.

Working with the Congress, the next Administration should be prepared to bolster U.S. strategic advantages in the Asia-Pacific. This will mean improving military readiness, insisting on freer and fairer trade, strengthening relations with regional partners, and making more robust commitments to advancing democratic institutions, human rights, and the rule of law.

This last point will require the U.S. to push China to embrace greater transparency and better adherence to universal standards. It will require the next Administration to shine a bright light on human rights abuses and level meaningful sanctions in response to these abuses. The U.S. must also find ways to support China's reformers, dissidents, and its champions of liberty and the rule of law.

The bipartisan Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), which we cochair, recently issued its 2016 Annual Report with specific recommendations for ways to pursue human rights and the rule of law within U.S.-China relations.

This report is the "gold standard" of human rights reports on China. I want to publicly commend the CECC staff for their efforts producing the report. It is a big task and I appreciate their hard work. The report should be required reading for Members of Congress interested in China, journalists writing on China, and for Administration officials looking to develop strategies to engage with China.

The need for principled and consistent American leadership is more important than ever, as China's growing economic clout, and persistent diplomatic efforts, have succeeded in dampening global criticism of its escalating repression and failures to adhere to universal standards.

We owe a new approach to Liu Xiaobo, Li Heping, and the thousands of other suffering prisoners of conscience. And, we owe it to future generations of Americans,

whose security and prosperity will depend on a U.S.-China relationship that is open and transparent, free of censorship and persecution, based in adherence to universal standards and, hopefully; increasingly democratic.