



Strategic Persistence

How the United States Can Help Improve Human Rights in China

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Executive Summary

The relationship between the United States and China may well be the most important bilateral relationship in the world. In recognition of that fact, the Center for American Progress released a comprehensive report in August 2008, entitled “A Global Imperative: A Progressive Approach to U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century,” that addressed all aspects of U.S.-China relations. Building upon that report, “Strategic Persistence: How the United States Can Help Improve Human Rights in China” is designed to provide both fundamental principles that should guide U.S. policymakers in their efforts to effect positive change in China’s human rights practices and concrete recommendations to advance those efforts.

Despite significant progress in realizing social and economic rights and even some increases in individual freedoms, China remains responsible for profound violations of its people’s civil and political rights. In its foreign policy, China has often backed repressive regimes around the world and watered down international sanctions against them. None of this is in the United States’ best interests. Given the high degree of economic interdependence between the United States and China and China’s growing military reach, American interests are best served by a stable China with a robust commitment to the rule of law—conditions that are undermined by a failure to respect human rights.

U.S. approaches to human rights in China have ranged from confrontation to passivity and have rarely reflected a coordinated strategy across government entities. The key to U.S. efforts to promote human rights in China is to take a coherent, pragmatic, non-ideological approach that goes beyond easy rhetoric, taking advantage of strategic openings and recognizing the value of persistence. Ultimately, China must be persuaded that greater democracy and human rights are in its own best interests, integral to its becoming the highly respected global leader it aspires to be.

This paper outlines eight principles that should inform the U.S. approach to improving human rights in China:

Calibrate our strategy to China’s unique circumstances. China is a major power and the United States has a multiplicity of interests in relation to it. Human rights policy must take those facts into account.

Develop separate strategies for democracy promotion and human rights. The two are related, but they are not identical. Each deserves its own carefully designed approach.

Opt preferentially for carrots over sticks. The United States' capacity to "punish" China is limited and generally ineffective. The United States should not hesitate to criticize China as appropriate, but our preference should be for reinforcing positive changes.

Understanding is not condoning. China faces an array of profound challenges. The United States should acknowledge them in order to know better how to influence the Chinese government.

Appeal to China's interests and connect the dots. Human rights are in China's own best interests, but the Chinese government rarely perceives that to be the case and often misjudges how others will respond to its actions. Wherever possible, the United States should base its appeals on China's own needs.

Globalize the pressure and encourage China to play by the world's rules. The United States cannot change China's human rights practices by itself. Some of the most effective pressure will come from other nations encouraging China to live up to the global standards expected of a world leader.

Seek common ground but take advantage of internal divisions over human rights. In some areas, such as trafficking of persons, China's interests and those of the United States are generally aligned. On other issues, such as the utility of "reeducation through labor" camps, the Chinese are themselves divided. The United States should be alert to both circumstances.

Ignore the rhetoric, don't be distracted and never give up. China is not immutable to pressure despite its occasionally extreme rhetoric. The United States must speak with one voice and recognize that improvement in China's human rights practices may be a long time coming.

This paper then applies these principles in a series of recommendations designed to increase the coherence of U.S. strategy and address openings provided by U.S. efforts to boost:

- Trade and investment
- Access to the Internet by Chinese citizens
- Labor rights
- Efforts to combat trafficking in persons
- Religious freedom
- Human rights in Tibet and Xinjiang
- Chinese foreign policy with respect to repressive regimes

These eight principles and the recommendations that follow will, we believe, enable the new Obama administration and the 111th Congress to make substantial progress on human rights in China and in China's human rights-related foreign policy. This paper concludes, however, by recognizing that persistence above all is required of those who seek to advance human rights.

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