Human Rights as a National Security Threat: The Case of the PRC

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In response to criticisms over the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) human rights record from both domestic dissidents and foreign activists, Beijing has formulated a response that characterizes this pressure as a security threat. If these demands for greater human rights protection were met, say Chinese officials and state-sanctioned media organs, it would result in societal chaos, economic retrogression, loss of national territory, and new vulnerability to foreign exploitation. This article explores the origins of Beijing's position and its implications for the PRC's foreign relations.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy, human rights, national security, regime security, Sino-U.S. relations

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Many human rights activists would find it absurd for a government to argue that demands for it to cease abusing its own citizens constitute a threat to its national security. Many security analysts would object to including human rights in a conceptual category traditionally dominated by the use and potential use of military force. Yet, this is essentially how the Beijing government has reacted to both internal and external pressures for greater human rights protection. If met, say Chinese officials and state-sanctioned media organs, these demands would result in societal chaos, economic retrogression, loss of national territory, and new vulnerability to foreign exploitation. The origins, logic, and ramifications of this astonishing argument are the subjects of this article.

Background

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) renewed inter-

national ties after the isolation and self-absorption of the Cultural Revolution, it has displayed ambivalence toward international human rights initiatives—signing some relevant United Nations agreements, declining to sign others, and frequently refusing to cooperate satisfactorily with international human rights monitors. Beijing has hoped to cultivate an international reputation as a progressive, responsible nation, while at the same time minimizing foreign criticism of its own human rights record. It was comparatively easy for the Chinese to maintain this awkward balance through the 1970s, when they became de facto Cold War allies of the West against the Soviet Union, and the 1980s, when they thrilled Western liberals by abandoning Marxism and inviting foreign trade and investment. Mikhail Gorbachev himself complained to the United States government about its double standard of vigorously condemning human rights violations in the Soviet Union but ignoring those in the PRC. The reason for this, of course, was the Cold War. Accordingly, the diminution of the Soviet threat cleared the way for human rights issues to assume greater prominence in the West's relationship with the PRC, and the Tiananmen massacre of June 1989 pushed them to the top of the agenda. Criticism of the PRC over the imprisonment of dissidents, the occupation of Tibet, and other human rights issues has subsequently grown. The United States government explicitly linked human rights to Sino-U.S. economic relations, making Chinese progress on human rights a condition for American renewal of the PRC's most-favored-nations (MFN) trading status, reviewed annually by Washington. Beijing was eventually forced to react, marshalling its own government-friendly scholars, developing a response to Western attacks, and taking its case to the outside world.

Factors Driving the Official Chinese Position

Beijing's response to human rights pressure stems from several important factors. Beginning with the general and working toward the specific, the first of these factors is the worldview of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Beijing considers the Western powers basically hostile, a view underpinned by both the recent history of Western imperialism in China and the Marxist worldview in which the PRC remains deeply steeped. Despite its shift from the Marxist model toward an increasing convergence with the economic systems of the West, Chinese military and political leaders still see the United States

as their principal long-term potential enemy.[1] The Chinese tend to view all interactions with the United States and its allies within this context of a struggle for international political power.

From Beijing's point of view, the post-Cold War era finds Western civilization in decline, eroded largely by political values that place the desires of individual citizens above the needs of society as a whole. Northeast and Southeast Asian states, on the other hand, are on the rise, leading the world in economic growth. In the opinion of many Chinese and other East Asian observers, Western democracies, with their high unemployment rates, decreasing competitiveness, disintegrating families, and growing social pathology, have seen the writing on the wall and are looking for ways to slow Asia before it becomes the center of world economic and political power. With the military option now unfeasible, the most viable Western strategy is to encourage Asians to adopt the Western democratic political model, which would result in Asia's importation of the debilitating social problems and inefficiency now plaguing the West. This is what the PRC government sees, for example, in the "peaceful evolution" strategy advocated by former U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and more recently known as "constructive engagement."

Beijing claims to practice a "principled" foreign policy, and the two principles it refers to most are sovereignty and noninterference. In Beijing's view, the proper role of international organizations such as the United Nations is to facilitate discussion and consensus on matters beyond the jurisdiction of any single national government. What happens within a state's borders, however, is strictly the business of that state and no one else. Short of a direct threat to their own citizens or interests, outsiders should not tell a state how to manage its internal affairs.

The Chinese are also quick to decry "hegemonism," the attempt by powerful countries such as the United States to increase their influence by coercing their neighbors. Like the principle of noninterference, antihegemonism finds strong support in a country that suffered bitterly under intrusions of the major powers during the "century of shame" prior to the founding of the People's Republic. Within this worldview, human rights pressure is interpreted as the

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[1]Good evidence of this appears in Ross H. Munro, "Eavesdropping on the Chinese Military: Where It Expects War—Where It Doesn't," *Orbis* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 355-72, esp. 356.

latest weapon wielded by Western nations still hoping to weaken and control China.

Another important factor is the CCP's interpretation of modern Chinese history, and particularly the Party's own role. As Chinese officialdom tells the story, before the CCP takeover, China was economically, politically, and culturally stagnant. A small group of treasonous Chinese lived off the fat of the land while the great majority were overwhelmed by poverty and injustice from which they had no means of freeing themselves. Nearly defenseless against other nations because of apathetic and corrupt leadership, China was humiliated, carved up, and brutalized by foreigners. The Communist Party, however, turned China's fortunes completely around. It broke the chains of foreign domination and built an effective national defense force. The CCP brought social and economic justice, redistributing property to the working classes and promising to provide for the basic needs of all Chinese. The Party greatly reduced starvation, illiteracy, and disease, while leading the country into a period of unprecedented prosperity and rapid growth. In this rhetorical construction, the distinction between the age of weakness, backwardness, and suffering under precommunist governments and the age of strength, reform, and progress under the CCP could not be starker. Thus, any expression of doubt about the Party's legitimacy or methods is tantamount to treason.

A third factor in Beijing's response to human rights pressure is the nature of the political system the CCP has built. The Party's original bargain with the people was essentially this: give the Party maximum political power, and the Party will use this power to serve and protect the masses. As a consequence, practical distinctions between the Party and the state disappeared. Since the Party acted on behalf of the masses, the Party's interests took precedence over the interests (or "rights") of any individual or group. All potential competing groups had to be brought under Party control or outlawed. The Party was also above the law, and the law itself became a malleable tool for pursuing Party interests rather than protection for society against state excesses.

The PRC government might well make human rights a case in point. The various pre-1949 governments, including the ancient dynastic monarchies, the republic founded after the 1911 revolution, the warlord quasi-states, and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT, Nationalist Party of China) regime, all had a similar disregard for human rights. The situation improved greatly after the establishment

of the People's Republic, especially as socioeconomic hardships lessened. Beijing would argue that the rise in general living standards validates the CCP project and more than compensates for the restriction of some civil liberties, which in any case generate inefficiency and disorder when they are granted in excess, as in Western democracies.

The present leadership would have us believe that China's recent successes demonstrate the CCP's wisdom and competence and that to maintain this progress, a continuation of the present system—the "socialist road"—is crucial; otherwise, China would be in danger of relapsing into its former state of poverty, backwardness, and vulnerability. If China "reverted to the capitalist system," wrote one commentator, "most Chinese would again become slaves of foreign capital and a domestic exploitating [*sic*] class. China would return to chaos."[2] It is equally important that the CCP, and no other party, remain at the helm. Without "upholding leadership by the Communist Party," proclaims Premier Li Peng, "there would be no stability in our country or unity of the people."[3] A *People's Daily* editorial writer added, "Without leadership by the [Communist] Party, people will become disunited like grains of sand; the country will be divided; economic construction and reform and opening to the outside world will be out of the question; and so will social stability and people's well-being."[4] Hence, maintenance of the present system, with state power monopolized by the CCP, is the essence of Deng Xiaoping's oft-quoted Four Cardinal Principles. Calls for political liberalization, with which demands for greater civil liberties are closely associated, collide head-on with this pillar of the regime.

The result has been a consistent CCP pattern in dealing with political deviants. From the Mao era through the Deng era, the CCP regime has never tolerated serious challenges to the Party's monopoly on political power. Opposition to Party officials or policies has been considered "counterrevolutionary," implying a desire to return to the awful conditions that prevailed before the CCP takeover. Dissent has been allowed occasionally and temporarily by certain officials

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[2]Yao Jianguo, "Revelations of the Opium War," *Beijing Review* 33, no. 23 (June 4-10, 1990): 4.

[3]"Li Peng Delivers Government Work Report at NPC Session," *China Report*, April-June 1990, 190.

[4]"New Historical Mission and the Communist Party of China," *People's Daily*, July 1, 1992.

as a weapon in factional battles, but in general dissidents have been eventually punished (e.g., the Hundred Flowers movement and the Democracy Wall movement). The government has been particularly intolerant of independent labor unions, disbanding them and arresting their leaders as soon as they are discovered.

A fourth factor is the PRC's own understanding of what the term "human rights" entails. The Chinese Communists approach the human rights debate using assumptions common among developing countries but different from the premises of many Western human rights thinkers. The most important of these assumptions are cultural relativism, a broad interpretation of the scope of human rights, and a sequential approach to human rights implementation. The official Chinese position is evidence of cultural relativism in that the Chinese argue different societies have different conceptions of what the term "human rights" entails, and none of these conceptions is necessarily better than any other. The task of defining human rights is, once again, an internal matter based on local conditions, and outsiders should respect the final result. Chinese officialdom rejects the universalist approach, particularly since they see it as an attempt to force Western-style civil liberties upon the rest of the world.

The distinction between the broad and narrow understandings of human rights reflects the difference between the classic, Eurocentric notion and more recent reformulations by theorists in the developing world. As first articulated by Western thinkers, human rights involved safeguarding the freedom of individuals against the power of state authorities. Many have since called this formulation too narrow, contending that basic survival needs such as food and shelter are at least as important as free speech and elections, and therefore that social and economic rights merit as much protection as political and civil rights. Thus the broad view of human rights, to which Beijing subscribes, admits both categories. For authoritarian, rapidly-growing states such as the PRC, the broad view allows their strengths (improvement in living standards) to balance out their weaknesses (lack of political liberties).

Separating rights into two categories raises the question of their relative priority. While many Western analysts maintain that political and socioeconomic rights should be implemented concurrently, or even that increased political liberties will facilitate economic development, much of the developing world, including the PRC government, argues that political liberalization will impede economic and social progress. In societies with low levels of income and education and

without experience in democratic rule, extensive political privileges are likely to create instability. Civil liberties must therefore wait until basic socioeconomic needs are met, lest everything be lost.

Finally, Beijing's reaction to human rights pressure is shaped by the PRC's immediate domestic political circumstances. While demands for more political and civil rights are intrinsically alarming to the CCP leadership, they are especially threatening in the 1990s for several reasons.

Since the breakup of the Soviet empire and its sphere of influence, the world's few remaining nominally communist regimes, of which the PRC is the most prominent, are on the defensive. At the same time, opening the door to the outside world has, as expected, let in a few flies: liberal political ideas spread by contact with foreigners, especially Westerners. The economic reforms of the 1980s have also created internal disorder in the form of strikes, riots, increased corruption, local leaders' disobedience of central government orders, and rising crime rates. According to Greg Austin, the deterioration of public order has reached "crisis" proportions, and "the PRC leadership now views political stability as more seriously challenged than at any time since reform policies were launched in 1978."[5] Finally, the imminent demise of Deng as paramount leader creates uncertainty about the future not only of individual careers, but of the system itself. At the same time, none of the potential successors wants to appear "soft" on domestic troublemakers or scheming foreign enemies. Thus, in the first half of the decade, the PRC's domestic environment has provided ample incentives for a strong, negative government response to human rights demands.

Internal Security Threats

After the Tiananmen massacre, Chinese officials took pains to emphasize to audiences both at home and abroad that the demonstrators were challenging the CCP's authority. "An extremely small number of people with ulterior motives have deliberately created turmoil . . . [which] has developed into a horrifying counterrevolutionary riot," read one of the earliest official statements, establishing

[5]Greg Austin, "The Strategic Implications of China's Public Order Crisis," *Survival* 37, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 7.

a line that was repeated in countless official narratives to follow. "The purpose of their riots is to negate the Party's leadership and socialist system, and to subvert the PRC." The statement then reiterated the argument with which Chinese audiences were familiar: had the rioters succeeded in their aim, "the People's Republic, which was established in exchange for the lives of tens of thousands of martyrs, would have been subverted, socialist construction and the achievements made in the 10 years of reform would have been destroyed immediately, and the whole country would then be shrouded in terror."[6]

A few days later, PRC State Council spokesman Yuan Mu regurgitated this interpretation during a televised interview with American broadcast journalist Tom Brokaw: "Thugs and hooligans instigated a counterrevolutionary rebellion to overthrow the leadership of the Communist Party of China and alter the socialist system."[7] To most viewers in Brokaw's home country, however, this was an odd assertion; what was so bad about opposing the communist government? Didn't most Chinese favor abandoning socialism for market reforms? Did the Chinese authorities expect to gain sympathy overseas by admitting they sent in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) merely to protect what Americans understood to be a moribund, unpopular system and the Party officials' own privileged positions? And why would "thugs and hooligans" have such a sophisticated political agenda?

In Tibet, the government also charges that destructive, self-interested local traitors are using the human rights issue as a means of fulfilling their "ulterior motives." The Beijing-approved story of Tibet begins with an "extremely decadent feudal society" in which "serfs made up 90 percent of the population and had no personal freedoms at all. They were the private property of serf-owners." Shortly after the CCP won the Chinese civil war, the PLA troops and political officers entered Tibet to implement the same socialist program under way elsewhere in mainland China (this was no "invasion," according to Beijing, because Tibet was incorporated into China by mutual agreement during the thirteenth century). Most Tibetans

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[6]Chinese radio broadcast, June 4, 1989, in *Survey of World Broadcasts* [hereafter *SWB*], FE/0475 (June 6, 1989): B2/1-2.

[7]"Spokesman on Current Situation," *Beijing Review* 32, no. 27 (July 3-9, 1989): 12.

literally cheered the arrival of the PLA, anticipating reforms that would lead to present-day Tibet's "social stability, thriving economic growth, and constant development of religious activities. . . . Tibetan people had never been able to enjoy such ample human rights and basic freedoms as they can today." The controversy over Tibet stems from the small number of Tibetans who did not gain from CCP administration. "The reactionary upper class clique in Tibet oppose[d] democratic reforms in order to uphold its privileges," the line goes. These Tibetan "separatists" have fomented rebellion since 1959 and continue their campaign today (with considerable assistance from foreign "imperialists," as we shall see below) under the leadership of the exiled Dalai Lama. In an effort to generate international pressure on Beijing to grant Tibet complete autonomy, the separatists "have rigged up false charges and sung the same old tune that human rights in Tibet have been seriously violated and threatened." If these separatists were successful, says Beijing, several million Chinese citizens would again fall into oppression, and a large chunk of Chinese territory would be lost—thus, human rights would have been used as a wedge to divide China.[8]

External Security Threats

While the causes of the unrest that led to the Tiananmen massacre were mostly homegrown, the official Chinese media charges that the demonstrators were under significant foreign influence. "Some anti-China elements of the United States were deeply involved in the turmoil," stated the *People's Daily*. Rebels "used funds and materials provided partly by overseas reactionaries," said a *Beijing Review* commentator. Political organizations in the United States allegedly sent messages to students in mainland China inciting them to revolt. Some of the demonstrators talked of joining forces with the KMT government in Taiwan to defeat the CCP. A Beijing television broadcast asserted that when the demonstrations began, the KMT "ordered its agents hidden on the mainland to take part directly in the turmoil and aggravate the situation." The Chinese Xinhua

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[8]Xinhua, August 10, 1995, in *SWB*-FE/2383 (August 16, 1995): G/3; *Xizang ribao* (Tibet Daily), April 2, 1995, in *SWB*-FE/2270 (April 5, 1995): G/14; "Tibetans Enjoy All Human Rights," *Beijing Review* 35, no. 15 (April 13-19, 1992): 15-17; and "Tibetans on Human Rights in Tibet," ibid. no. 40 (October 5-11, 1992): 4-5.

news agency described how Ou Zongyou, a forty-six-year-old mainland man "infatuated with money and the bourgeois way of life," was recruited by Taiwan's Military Intelligence Bureau for spying and agitation. Ou reportedly "stepped up his activities as riots and disturbances occurred," striving to "confuse and poison people's minds by spreading such vicious words as 'the Communist Party is bound to collapse this time'."[9]

Chinese commentary charged that several of the prominent dissident leaders had foreign connections. Liu Xiaobo (dubbed by the press "vicious manipulator") reportedly "clamoured for collaboration with overseas reactionary forces" and sought "to bring the student movement onto the path of linking up internal and external reactionary forces." Wuer Kaixi ("contemptible scoundrel") was "nothing more than a plaything in the hands of [U.S.] Congressmen." Yan Jiaqi (also a "contemptible scoundrel") had "publicly advocat[ed] the Western bourgeois political system." And Physicist Fang Lizhi ("scum of the Chinese people") had called for "complete Westernization," suggested that "China needs not only to be liberalized but also to be dissolved and disintegrated," and was a "traitor and collaborator under the shelter of foreigners." Internal discontent, Beijing argued, had created an opening for the imperialist forces ever seeking to weaken, control, and exploit China; human rights was their fig leaf. When the other major powers responded to Tiananmen by cutting economic and political contacts with the PRC, CCP-approved commentaries compared the sanctions to the Opium War (Britain's retaliation in 1840-42 against Chinese government efforts to stop the British from smuggling in opium); the Japanese invasion during the Pacific War; and the 1949 embargo, when "hostile foreign forces plotted to strangle fledgling socialist China."[10]

The involvement of "hostile foreign forces" has been even greater in Tibet, say the Chinese. Foreign intervention goes back to the Qing Dynasty, when "imperialist forces . . . began plotting to carve

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[9]"New Demonstration of Hegemonism," *People's Daily*, February 25, 1990, trans. in *Beijing Review* 33, no. 11 (March 12-18, 1990): 10; Shi Wei, "What Has Happened in Beijing?" *Beijing Review* 32, no. 26 (June 26-July 2, 1989): 11; Shi Wei, "Why Impose Martial Law in Beijing?" ibid., 17-18; *SWB*-FE/0491 (June 24, 1989): A3/1; Xinhua, June 21, 1989, in *SWB*-FE/0490 (June 23, 1989): A3/2.

[10]*People's Daily*, June 14, 1989, in *SWB*-FE/0483 (June 15, 1989): B2/11; Wang Zhao, "Seize the Vicious Manipulator—Liu Xiaobo," *Beijing Review* 32, no. 28 (July 10-16, 1989): 23, 24; Jian Chuan, "The True Features of 'Democratic Fighters'," ibid., no. 49 (December 4-10, 1989): 19-22; Yao, "Revelations of the Opium War," 4.

up China, Tibet included." British troops invaded twice at the turn of the century and tried unsuccessfully to convince Tibetan officials to renounce their allegiance to China. After the establishment of the communist regime, Beijing charges, the United States government clandestinely armed and trained Tibetan rebels. Although no major government recognizes Tibet as a sovereign state, many Western activists have joined the Dalai Lama in calling for Tibetan independence. Their case is based mostly on allegations of systematic human rights abuses by Chinese authorities in Tibet, including suppression of traditional Tibetan religion and culture and harsh treatment of Tibetan dissidents, many of them monks and nuns. In Beijing's view, however, the human rights issue is merely the latest strategy employed by "international anti-China forces attempting to exploit the issues of 'human rights and religion' to create an opening in Tibet through which they can proceed to achieve their goals of 'secession' and 'Westernization'."[11] In the initial steps of this plan, at least, these imperialists are confederate with Tibetan separatists, creating a security threat from both within and without.

Finally, the pattern established in Beijing's discourse on Tiananmen and Tibet recurs in its reaction to the annual reports on world human rights published by the United States Department of State. Not surprisingly, PRC officials and government-supported scholars have concluded these reports are "distorted," "not serious," "unfair," "astonishing and outrageous," "fundamentally based on rumors and subjective conjecture," and "full of empty, slanderous words." While they ordinarily avoid criticizing the domestic affairs of other countries that do not involve Chinese ethnics or nationals ("noninterference"), PRC officials have recently resorted to refuting (some) specific points in these reports, and even to taking the offensive, arguing that human rights are actually better protected in the PRC than in the United States. The PRC has the world's lowest crime rate, says Beijing, while the United States has the highest; the United States has more homeless people, a higher proportion of its population in prison, a lower percentage of women in high levels of government, and more pervasive racial discrimination than the PRC. (Once again, the Chinese emphasis on socioeconomic over

[11]Yu Dunxiu, "Persist in the Two-Handed Approach and Intensify the Antisplittist Struggle," *Xizang ribao*, January 30, 1995, in *SWB*-FE/2273 (April 8, 1995): G/5.

civil/political rights is clearly manifest.) Beijing does not attribute this disagreement to mere cultural dissimilarities or to an honest difference of opinion. Rather, "the aim of the United States is not to protect human rights, but to force China to be 'Westernized' and 'decentralized'," that is, reconquered.[12]

Human Rights: A Legitimate Threat to National Security?

As we have seen, Beijing claims human rights are a security threat in two senses. First, they represent a challenge to the successful status quo, and, therefore, a retrogression to the catastrophic status quo ante. (A third possibility, that a more democratic China under the leadership of a different party might continue to be strong, united, and prosperous, is, of course, neglected). China's uniquely difficult social and economic circumstances have made it impossible for the Chinese to have both extensive personal liberties and socio-economic development; in the CCP's view, the former would destroy the latter.

Accordingly, the Party admits to having limited political rights in order to safeguard the nation's long-term interests. Activists who demand liberalization either fail to realize the necessity of this trade-off or wish for chaos; either way, their efforts, if unchecked, would lead to internal political instability, economic debilitation, and vulnerability to exploitation by outside powers.

Secondly, the Party believes the human rights issue is a weapon used by foreign governments attempting to weaken and control China. The United States government, some of its allies, and many private citizens and groups from the same countries openly call for the subversion of the ruling government, fund and protect Chinese dissidents, and campaign for greater autonomy for peoples and territories Beijing considers its own.

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[12]Xinhua, March 4, 1995, in *SWB*-FE/2245 (March 7, 1995): G/3; Yu Quanyu, "China Leads the US in Human Rights," *Beijing Review* 37, no. 40 (October 3-9, 1994): 24; *People's Daily*, February 25, 1990, trans. in *Beijing Review* 33, no. 11 (March 12-18, 1990): 9-10; Liu Wenzong, "U.S. 'Diplomacy of Human Rights'," *Beijing Review* 35, no. 23 (June 8-14, 1992): 11; "Comments on U.S. State Department Human Rights Report on China," ibid. 37, no. 24 (June 13-19, 1994): 8; "A Report Which Distorts Facts and Confuses Right and Wrong," ibid. 38, no. 11 (March 13-19, 1995): 17-22; and Zhongguo xinwenshe, March 3, 1995, in *SWB*-FE/2244 (March 6, 1995): G/1.

From a theoretical standpoint, human rights represent an extreme departure from traditional national security threats. If this conceptualization is accepted, perhaps we must recognize another New Age security threat, to be added to the list along with environmental pollution, drug trafficking, global warming, AIDS, and immigration.

But can human rights legitimately be considered a security threat? Human rights pressures are clearly a threat to *regime* security, for they represent attacks on the CCP's legitimacy and monopolization of political power. Whether these pressures can be considered threats to *national* security hinges on the question of whether China would be a stronger and more prosperous country under the CCP or under a more liberal regime.

Similarly, two general motives may be deduced for the approach Beijing has chosen to human rights pressures. First, describing human rights activism as a danger to national well-being may be merely a smokescreen to justify repression of the regime's opponents. Second, Chinese officials may sincerely believe that China can only achieve its potential under CCP leadership. The distinction is important because contrary to the CCP's implicit logic, what is good for the regime might be bad for the country, and vice versa. If, for example, a legitimate government and a sense of participation among the citizenry help contribute to nation-building, and if the rule of law facilitates economic development, CCP officials might be *undermining* the national interest to save their own skins.

It must be noted in favor of the "smokescreen" theory that Beijing's approach to the human rights issue emphasizes the CCP's strong suit (i.e., the fact that China is better off economically now than when the Party took over in 1949), obscures its greatest weakness (lack of protection of individual liberties from state abuse), and gives the government carte blanche to move against its domestic opponents. While the Party tried to gain sympathy by characterizing the Tiananmen ringleaders as "thugs and hooligans," the intentions of demonstrators ultimately do not matter. As Deng Xiaoping once noted, "If there is this demonstration today, that one tomorrow, if for 365 days there are demonstrations every day, then economic construction will be out of the question."[13] Even patriotic, well-

[13]"Deng Xiaoping on Upholding the Four Cardinal Principles and Combating Bourgeois Liberalization," *Beijing Review* 32, no. 29 (July 17-23, 1989): 19.

meaning protests disturb the Party's program. Taken to its logical conclusion, the CCP's position is that *any* activism outside the auspices of the Party for increased individual liberties poses a threat to security and therefore merits forcible repression.

The sincerity of the official position is also undermined by its tendency to condemn all human rights activists as imperialists, which is clearly wrong. While the human rights issue has certainly been used to cloak baser motives before, many of these activists, be they in governmental posts or private organizations, have only the best intentions toward the Chinese people.

Most importantly, CCP policies that have directly or indirectly led to massive cruelty and exploitation of Chinese citizens over the decades demand criticism, and the CCP's claim that all of the suffering it has inflicted was a necessary price to pay for China's present prosperity is questionable, to say the least.

Despite all this, the regime's position on human rights pressures is not logically or historically implausible from the Chinese standpoint. While rhetoric is often tailored to suit interests, deeply-entrenched rhetorical constructs can also shape the perception of interests. Interpretations, in other words, may become "reality" for the people who inherit them. Many Chinese officials likely believe they are to some extent acting in the interests of their country, and not just their party, in resisting human rights pressure. They are certainly less inclined to make the distinction between the state and government that is so familiar to the citizens of multiparty democracies. Furthermore, most Chinese would credit the CCP with significant successes and worry about the uncertainties involved in handing leadership of the country over to another party.

In sum, both the narrower and the nobler motives are likely at work in the government's reaction to human rights pressures. What seems indisputable is that a fundamental sense of insecurity grips both the Party and the country. This is perhaps difficult to understand for outsiders, who have tended to see China's large population as a strategic asset rather than a liability, who saw a much weaker China than that of today successfully defend the buffer state of North Korea against conquest by the world's preeminent military power, and who watch in awe as China posts the world's highest economic growth rate. Many Chinese, however, see their country as basically poor and backward, perennially on the edge of starvation and revolution, fraught with ethnic tensions, and recently savaged by foreign powers.

Beijing's perception of international relations is dominated by the fear of attack and subversion by the Western camp, much the same way American strategic thinking of the Cold War era was dominated by perceived threats of various kinds from the Soviet Union. For Beijing, the human rights issue remains confined within the framework of the Sino-U.S. conflict, within which it appears as just another means of Western imperialist war against China's development. Thus, Beijing's reaction to human rights pressure is similar to its responses to foreign criticism over other issues ranging from intellectual property rights violations to the future administration of Hong Kong. Invariably, any opposition to Beijing's positions is ascribed to a neo-imperialist impulse to repress the Chinese nation.

Prospects for a Resolution

The prospects for the CCP taking a more sympathetic view toward human rights demands are not promising. The reason is that the regime's deep sense of insecurity, on which the Chinese position is largely based, will probably persist throughout the near future. The post-Deng succession crisis and the problems associated with the still-incomplete conversion to a market-based economy will make the domestic environment potentially unstable for years to come.

Nor is Beijing likely to change its attitude toward disputes over human rights with the United States and other liberal-minded states. Again, the environment is too threatening, and the stakes too high, for the Chinese to make concessions. United States military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region have become more threatening to the Chinese now that they are no longer balanced by Soviet power; to the CCP, the Americans clearly remain interested in peaceful evolution and the eventual overthrow of the Party.

The best hope for a rapprochement with the PRC over human rights lies with the U.S. side. While this is a life-or-death issue for the Beijing government, Washington can afford to subjugate moral concerns to the demands of realpolitik once again. Although the human rights issue has produced an openly confrontational approach toward the PRC by the United States and other Western countries, most other diplomatic, military, and economic considerations would be better served by more conciliatory relations (indeed, many argue that even in the area of human rights, quiet diplomacy and "constructive engagement" would achieve better results than public rebukes such as the State Department reports on human rights abuses).

Washington, for example, needs Beijing's cooperation in dealing with North Korea and limiting nuclear and missile technology proliferation, and in United Nations Security Council resolutions. The Clinton administration's surrender on the MFN issue also demonstrates the power of the economic imperative, especially when other nations stand ready to take over the market share the United States loses by taking the moral high road.

The United States has become increasingly isolated, particularly in Asia. No other Asian state supports a policy of economic pressure to induce greater human rights protection in the PRC. Affirmation for much of the PRC's position can be found in the Southeast Asian states of Myanmar (Burma), Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, where, as in the PRC, dominant parties are under strong pressures for political liberalization. Sympathy for the CCP's emphasis on order and stability can be found even in the more democratic Asian states. Much of Asia has formed a rhetorical bloc, with the PRC at its core, counterbalancing the liberal discourse based on so-called "Western" values. This bloc not only rejects U.S. leadership on the human rights issue, but also presents a formidable opponent to human rights advocates campaigning for more democratization and humaneness in authoritarian states.

Along with these political and economic inducements to back away from its combative human rights orientation toward the Chinese, it is also conceivable that increasing numbers of people in a demoralized America will find Beijing's arguments persuasive. For example, an author of a recent article in the *Beijing Review*, identified as an American teacher residing in the PRC, wondered, "Why on earth does America, year after year, harp on human rights in China but ignore and even abet grievous abuses elsewhere? . . . It is high time we [Americans] get off our moral high horse. . . ."[14] Less arrogance and ignorance from the American side would be, of course, a welcome development. It is not so clear, however, that a crisis of confidence in liberal political ideals would better the lot of anyone except authoritarian governments.

Human rights is one of several pressing issues in which the potential exists for most or all of the world's nations to transcend

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[14]William N. Brown, "Human Rights or Trade Rights?" *Beijing Review* 38, no. 25 (June 19-25, 1995): 15, 19.

narrow national or regional interests and find common ground. Beijing's approach to human rights, however, suggests that Beijing is unable or unwilling to do this. Beijing's stance is a major setback to those seeking to promote global values, as well as those hoping for a real reconciliation between the PRC and the West.