

Beijing's global battle over human rights

China's new world order doesn't have a place for human rights as they're known today

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China is leading the charge to undermine universally accepted concepts of human rights, accountability and justice.

What the Chinese have accomplished in a relatively short time, backed by autocrats elsewhere, is to turn human rights into an underrated, yet crucial battleground in the shaping of a new world order. Its basic interest is to strengthen the hand of repressive, autocratic or authoritarian regimes.

China may see its actions as being justified by the needs to manage its northwestern province of Xinjiang, which has resulted in an unprecedented crackdown on Turkic Muslims. The global community has also observed the accelerated rollout of restrictions elsewhere in the country.

In a global context, one pivotal element of the Chinese campaign to alter the face — and practice — of human rights is the export of key elements of its model of a 21st century Orwellian surveillance state.

Calling all autocrats

The multipronged Chinese effort is highlighted in Human Rights Watch's World Report 2019. It points to proposals to alter the principles on which United Nations

Human Rights Council (UNHRC) operates as another way in which China seeks to alter the global agenda in a manner that runs counter to the smooth Davos talk by Xi in January 2017.

To achieve its goal, China is strongly relying on the financial muscle it has gained from its successful pursuit of the mechanisms of economic globalization. Its infrastructure and energy-driven "Belt and Road" initiative is intended to artfully apply those same mechanisms of economic globalization to entice countries that are financially strapped, desperate for investment and/or on the defensive because of human rights abuses to the Chinese cause of hollowing out the global relevance of those principles.

Equally crucially, China is seeking a dominant role in various countries' digital infrastructure and media. That effort would allow it to influence the flow of information and enable its allies to better control dissent.

Freedom House, a Washington-based freedom watchdog, reported last year that China was exporting to at least 18 countries sophisticated surveillance systems capable of identifying threats to public order and has made it easier to repress free speech in 36 others.

China's auspicious moment

China is waging its campaign at a crucial juncture of history. It benefits from the rise of ethno-nationalism as well as religious nationalism, populism, intolerance and the widespread anti-migration sentiment that has caught on across the world's democracies.

The campaign is enabled by the emergence of presidents like Donald Trump in the United States, the Philippines' Rodrigo



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Duterte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hungary's Victor Orban and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro.

These strong man leaders have either de-emphasized human rights or gone as far as justifying abuses in addition to seeking to limit, if not undermine, independent media that hold them accountable.

China vs. global protests

The thrust and the timing of the Chinese effort is especially significant because it comes at a moment when earlier predictions of the death of popular protest, symbolized

by the defeat of the initially successful 2011 popular Arab revolts, are being called into question. For evidence, just consider the mass anti-government demonstrations in Sudan where protesters demand the resignation of President Omar al-Bashir. Meanwhile, protests in Zimbabwe decry repression, poor public services, high unemployment, widespread corruption and delays in civil servants receiving their salaries.

The past year has also seen anti-government agitation in countries like Morocco and Jordan. Closer to home for the Chinese, anti-Chinese groups march in Kyrgyzstan.

The protests and what Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth describes in his foreword to the group's just published, 674-page World Report 2019 as "a resistance that keeps winning battles" suggests that China's campaign may have won battles but has yet to win the war.

"Victory isn't assured but the successes of the past year suggest that the abuses of authoritarian rule are prompting a powerful human rights counterattack," Roth wrote.

Nonetheless, Human Rights Watch's China director Sophie Richardson warned that "people outside China don't yet seem to realize that their human rights are ... increasingly under threat as Beijing becomes more powerful. ... In recent years, Beijing has ... sought to extend its influence into, and impose its standards and policies on, key international human rights institutions — weakening some of the only means of accountability and justice available to people around the world."

Richardson noted that China had last year successfully pushed a non-binding resolution in the UNHRC that advocated promotion of human rights on the basis of China's principle of win-win, a principle that cynics assert means China wins twice.

In a sign of the times, the resolution garnered significant support. The United States, in a twist of irony, was the only council member to vote against it, with countries like Germany and Australia — both countries for which China is an especially vital export market — notably abstaining.

The Saudi-Chinese alliance

China is not the only country that would like a globally accepted approach to be altered

to the detriment of human rights. Muslim nations, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, have, for example, long sought to have blasphemy criminalized.

The Chinese resolution "gutted the ideas of accountability for actual human rights violations, suggesting 'dialogue' instead. It failed to specify any course of action when rights violators refuse to cooperate with U.N. experts, retaliate against rights defenders or actively reject human rights principles. And it even failed to acknowledge any role for the HRC itself to address serious human rights violations when 'dialogue' and 'cooperation' don't produce results," Richardson said.

"If these ideas become not just prevailing norms but also actual operating principles for the HRC, victims of state-sponsored abuses worldwide — including in Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen — will face almost impossible odds in holding abusive governments accountable," Richardson cautioned.

Conclusion

China's efforts are both an attempt to rewrite international norms and counter sharp Western criticism of its moves against Christians and Muslims, and its crackdown in Xinjiang.

China and the West's diametrically opposed concepts of human rights are part of a larger contest for dominance over the future of technology and global influence.

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Xi: Smooth talker vs. brass knuckle operator

The Chinese leader's latest global export strategy: tools for human control

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Exactly two years ago, in his first appearance before the World Economic Forum in Davos, China's President Xi Jinping created a global splash when he presented himself as "Mr. Global Responsibility" in his strong defense of economic globalization (<http://jtim.es/g8Bo30no440>).

As Xi emphasized then, "economic globalization has created new problems. But this is no justification to write off economic globalization altogether. Rather we should adapt to and guide globalization, cushion its negative impact, and deliver its benefits to all countries and all nations," he declared suavely.

As he added then, "the global economy is the big ocean you cannot escape from" and China, said Xi, had "learned how to swim."

Since that moment, the world community has been waiting for how Xi would exactly follow up on his noble-sounding principles and intentions. To date, for all the very smooth words Xi spoke in his January 2017 maiden speech in Davos, we haven't seen much.

However, where China under Xi's management has strongly shown its hand in the

meantime is in the arena of global human rights. But has not occurred in a manner that would seem in any way compatible with the noble and high-minded Xi in the Davos 2017 edition. Instead, operating in a rather brass knuckle manner, as James Dorsey has detailed, China is leading the charge to undermine universally accepted concepts of human rights accountability and justice, evidently to create a brand of human rights with some very "Chinese characteristics."

A key part of that Chinese campaign, as Freedom House has credibly detailed (<http://jtim.es/lwrl-30no45c>), is to provide a tantalizing offer to dictators and autocrats elsewhere: Let us help you by allowing us to penetrate your country's IT infrastructure as well as the media sector to control the flow of information and better control dissent.

If anything, this is a very peculiar, in fact poisonous way for China to invest and apply the monetary and technological fruits it has so eagerly collected from the process of economic globalization.

Making these technologies an item in China's global export agenda is, of course, a tit-for-tat replay of the tools and strategies that Chinese leaders use so successfully and perniciously in their home society.

One must wonder whether creating an export market for such human control tech-

nologies is the responsible form of economic globalization that Xi really had in the back of his mind when he impressed — and stunned — pretty much everybody with his smooth operator speech two years ago in Davos.

Despite the clearly attached Chinese strings that come along with such an offer, the reason why the Chinese can have their way is self-evident: Autocrats everywhere have a strong desire to control their peoples as closely and effectively as possible.

What is especially ironic about the contemporary efforts by China's leaders to support other autocrats globally is that this control-freak strategy, intended to oppress popular dissent harshly and systematically by "virtue" of mind control, puts the Chinese Communist Party in direct conflict with its own genes.

It sprang in the 1940s from a determined revolutionary movement that sought to respond to, if not foment, popular protests and a high degree of popular dissatisfaction with the country's economy and politics at the time.

But that insight is just about the last thing that the smooth-talking and always suave-looking Xi would ever worry about. That's just not part of the CCP brand of "Chinese characteristics."

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China also built a big, beautiful wall, but it failed

Reasons familiar today doomed the Ming Dynasty's attempts to bolster border security

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From the moment he launched his campaign for president, Donald Trump compared the barrier he wanted to build along the U.S. southern border to China's Great Wall. With the U.S. government now shuttered by the standoff over funding Trump's wall, both he and his Democratic opponents might want to take a closer look at the Chinese fortification — and why exactly it failed.

The Great Wall visited by tourists today is the handiwork of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and was primarily constructed in the mid-to-late 16th century. The common perception is that the wall was conceived as a single, massive infrastructure project to protect China's tumultuous northern border from foreign invaders. It was nothing of the sort. The Great Wall was built to a great degree by default, by a political system too paralyzed by infighting to come up with anything better.

Border security had been a preoccupation of China's imperial court from its earliest days. "Barbarians" from the northern steppe — whether Xiongnu, Turk, Jurchen, Mongol or other — routinely threatened the Middle Kingdom. Some, such as Genghis Khan's Mongols in the 13th century, managed to overrun the entire empire.

The long northern boundary ran through inhospitable terrain that made it difficult to defend. Chinese emperors had tried a variety of methods to secure the border, from buying off the barbarians to mounting massive military expeditions against them. The problem would always return when a new batch of tribesmen appeared across the frontier.

The Ming Dynasty compounded the usual difficulties of securing the border with a combination of arrogance, division and indecision. The Ming court was an especially raucous place where hostile factions were almost constantly at each other's throats. The border issue often got dragged into these contests for palace power.

Generally, the Ming, having reclaimed the empire from Genghis Khan's descendants, leaned toward a tough line against their northern neighbors, often denying them the opportunity to trade with China. The Mongols were dependent on such trade for the grain and other supplies they needed to



survive on the inhospitable steppe. So they were left little choice but to launch raids into China to plunder what they needed. The attacks both hardened opinion in China against the Mongol tribes and heightened the urgency for more border security.

The fractured Ming court groped for a solution. Some officials advocated a more diplomatic approach that would restore trade and alleviate the pressure on the Mongols to raid. They were usually shouted down by more hawkish mandarins who thought such policies smacked of appeasement. The latter argued that Mongol requests for trade relations were just a ploy by the untrustworthy barbarians to lull the Chinese into a vulnerable complacency.

These hawks often favored military action to push the raiders away from the border. But, sending troops into the northern wastes to chase nomadic horsemen was costly, difficult to organize and widely unpopular. Proposals often got entangled in the arcane, personal intrigues between palace notables jockeying for imperial favor.

That seemed to leave the court with one option: building defensive barriers to keep the barbarians out. "Unwilling to trade with the Mongols, and unable to defeat them militarily, by the middle of the sixteenth century the Ming had no policy choice left but ... to attempt to exclude the nomads by building walls," historian Arthur Waldron wrote in his exhaustive study "The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth."

The strategy proved effective in blunting Mongol raids — where walls were built. The problem was that the mobile horsemen could easily shift their assaults to undefended areas of the border. That's exactly what a large Mongol force did in 1550 when it penetrated to the Beijing suburbs.

The response of the court was to build more walls. The Great Wall was the result of this haphazard defense policy.

The tragedy is that the Ming's big, beautiful wall failed to fulfill its sole mission: to protect China from invasion. The Ming were still tinkering with the massive structure when the dynasty collapsed in 1644. Amid the resulting chaos, a new steppe power, the Manchus, descended from the north, snatched Beijing and ruled as the Qing Dynasty.

Maybe the Manchu conquest was beyond repulse. A China divided was bound to fall. But, the Ming clearly contributed to their own catastrophe. A court environment that prioritizing defeating one's internal rivals over cooperating on policy stymied any hope of developing an effective solution to a serious problem. Emperors, coddled in luxurious palaces and lacking any real knowledge of conditions along the border, preferred looking tough on foreigners to compromise. Resistance to mutually beneficial trade deepened the causes of instability along the border. Treating those others across the frontier as bandits to be thwarted rather than poor people in need doomed Ming policy to failure.

Sound familiar? The ultimate lesson of the Great Wall of China is that a physical barrier, no matter how expensive and impressive, will fail if detached from a broader set of policies to alleviate the sources of insecurity along the border. The Ming never figured that out. Hopefully Washington's mandarins will.

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