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Sidelining Human Rights a Strategic Mistake the U.S. Cannot Afford to Make

*U.S. Rep. Chris Smith,
Chair, Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Press Conference
“A Human Rights Agenda for Obama-Xi Bilateral Meeting”
Excerpts of Remarks
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If human rights are sidelined again this week in the Obama-Xi meeting—it will not only be an unconscionable abandonment of China’s best and brightest who today suffer jail, torture, and death for freedom, but it will be a colossal strategic mistake, as well.

The U.S. cannot meekly “raise” human rights concerns when it is increasingly clear that our security and economic interests with China *will not be ensured* without dramatic human rights improvements and advances in the rule of law.

Mr. Xi comes to Washington in a time of growing bilateral tensions. In addition to cyber theft, economic slowdowns, and strained relations with China’s neighbors, Mr. Xi has also presided over an extraordinary assault on the rule of law and civil society.

The scope of Mr. Xi’s repression is immense with more arrests, censorship, and control now than at any time since Chairman Mao ruled China. The people of China deserve better.

Under his leadership, the Chinese government has pushed through new laws and draft legislation that would legitimize political, religious, and ethnic repression, further curtail civil liberties and civil society, and expand censorship of the Internet.

Draconian population control policies remain in place and gendercide—the extermination of the girl-child through sex-selection abortion— is a massive, festering problem that has catastrophic social and economic consequences.

Rights lawyers and labor organizers are jailed; Hong Kong booksellers disappear; journalists and religious leaders are harassed and detained; even the family members of overseas journalists—who dare to print information critical of President Xi—are targeted.

It is appalling that Liu Xiaobo remains in prison—particularly given that a fellow Nobel Peace Prize Laureate resides in the White House. I do not believe the President has done enough to seek the freedom of Liu Xiaobo or his wife Liu Xia.

If President Obama will only meekly seek the release of a fellow Nobel Prize Laureate—what is being done for the thousands of others imprisoned political prisoners. The answer is not enough.

If President Obama remains silent when China's human rights lawyers are tortured, jailed, and disappeared—what message does that send to all those in China seeking rights and freedom? Do not depend on U.S. leadership.

Until the release of Liu Xiaobo, and many others rights defenders are a clear and consistent priority of U.S.-China relations, the Chinese government will continue to believe that it can act with impunity and without any consequences.

The Obama Administration cannot continue to engage in the fantasy that avoiding human rights will somehow bring about a change of heart in Beijing. It will not. The U.S. must raise human rights because U.S. interests and better U.S.-China relations depend on it.

President Xi's shift toward a hard authoritarianism is a disturbing development. More than any time in recent memory, China is becoming a garrison state, with security forces empowered by new laws to silence dissent and drive a wedge between the Chinese people and the international community.

China seems to be closing its doors to new ideas and ways of thinking that are essential for the type of economic innovation, political transparency, and diplomatic cooperation needed to shape the future of U.S.-China relations.

Deteriorating human rights conditions in China means deteriorating conditions for U.S.-China diplomatic and security cooperation and the trust needed to build stronger relations.

Because the U.S.-China relationship is so strategically important, we should insist on China doing more—more protections for universally recognized human rights, greater commitment to the rule of law, and more attention to those seeking redress from injustices. The health and prosperity of bilateral relations will depend on such improvements.

There is both a moral and strategic imperative for the United States to prioritize advances in human rights and democratic governance in China.

A government that does not respect the rights and basic dignity of its own people cannot be assumed to be a responsible actor in the global arena.

A government that brutally crushes the yearning of its citizens for fundamental freedoms cannot be a trusted partner able to work on a number of pressing bilateral and global issues.

President Obama has nothing to lose by taking a tougher stance on human rights. What he has done to this point has not produced tangible results.

The U.S. cannot be silent in the face of the Chinese government's repression. We must show leadership and resolve because only the U.S. has the power and prestige to stand up to China's intransigence.

U.S. officials must not shy away from meeting with the Dalai Lama or other dissidents. We must use visa bans on Chinese officials who violate human rights. We must connect Internet and press freedoms as both economic and human rights priorities. And we must demand, repeatedly and clearly, that the unconditional release of political prisoners and an end to torture in detention is in the interest of better U.S.-China relations.

Standing here today with these heroes—I am hopeful. Constant repression has not dimmed the desires of the Chinese people for freedom and reform.

I believe that someday China will be free. Someday, the people of China will be able to enjoy all of their God-given rights.

And a nation of free Chinese men and women will honor and celebrate as heroes those Chinese who have fought so hard and suffered so long—for freedom.