

US, Asia and the geopolitics of human rights

The promotion of democracy and human rights is on the incoming Democratic White House's agenda but executing it is a different matter



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If Asia's problem with Donald Trump's presidency was his brutally transactional approach to trade and security, could human rights promotion become the new source of friction with US President-elect Joe Biden's Democratic administration?

Although many in Asia worry about the sweeping rhetoric of the Democrats on democracy promotion, realists believe Washington will be under pressure to balance America's human rights concerns against its geopolitical and economic interests.

Different Asian nations have faced the American ire on human rights issues before, but many of them have learnt to endure the consequences or found ways to keep the US pressure in check.

The sense of national sovereignty is quite strong in Asian nations – democracies or otherwise – and resistance against outside interference is easily mobilised. Standing up to the US also generates support from America's rivals.

Asian chancelleries – big and small – have also figured out that Washington is not a monolith; there are multiple groups trying to influence US policy, and human rights groups are one among the

many. There are groups and institutions with other interests that are open to more practical engagement; many of them support moderation and sustained engagement with Asia.

The history of US foreign policy tells us that no major American bilateral relationship has ever been held a hostage to a single issue like human rights. That broad trend is likely to hold under the Biden administration too.

Consider for a moment the current debate among the Biden people on China and India – Asia's largest political entities with very different political systems.

The past few months have seen mounting congressional and other pressures on Washington to act on concerns about democracy and rights in China – from Hong Kong to Xinjiang and Tibet. The US Congress approved a series of measures against Beijing, while outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other senior Cabinet members have articulated a fundamental ideological conflict between the US and China. Yet, for Mr Trump, a favourable trade deal with China was a far higher priority than challenging the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

A CLASH OF HAWKS

How might Mr Biden deal with China? Although he labelled Chinese President Xi Jinping a "thug" during the presidential campaign, he might have no choice but to maintain a working relationship with Beijing.

While progressives in the Democratic Party want him to make democracy promotion a

major objective with China and defence hawks argue for a tougher response to the Chinese military challenge, they are up against powerful forces that have backed the President-elect's campaign, including Wall Street and Silicon Valley, which want a return to productive commercial cooperation with China. The "climate hawks" in the party want a singular focus on cooperation with China to address what they consider the single most important threat to humanity.

China has moved quickly to leverage the contradictions, by offering progress on carbon emissions and opening up the financial sector to Wall Street. China has invested more than any country in understanding the domestic dynamics of the United States and developed capabilities to navigate between the contending forces shaping US policies and ensuring that political transitions in Washington do not harm Beijing's massive stakes in the US.

If being a communist was a drag for China in Washington, India's identity as the world's largest democracy always brought much goodwill for Delhi.

However, sections of the liberal establishment in the US now worry that India is becoming an illiberal democracy and there is some concern among the Democratic Party about India's recent change

in the constitutional status of Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the growing insecurity of minorities.

The Modi government has sought to address these concerns while also expanding the ambit of India's cooperation with the US, especially in the defence domain. Delhi is confident that its shared interests with Washington on Indo-Pacific security, climate change and trade would limit the potential harm from criticism on the rights front.

CHECKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICIES

That brings us to the structural factors that set boundaries to America's human rights policies. Five of them stand out.

One, promotion of human rights is very much part of US foreign policy ideology, but Washington has no option but to temper it in the pursuit of multiple other US interests.

What each administration does with it varies according to specific circumstances and the state of relationship with the country or region in question.

While the American rhetoric on rights tends to be universalistic, it has always ended up being tailored to different countries and different circumstances.

Selective application of human rights does not make the US

uniquely hypocritical. All major powers – whether democracies or communist – struggle to reconcile proclaimed ideology and specific national interests. No country can ever become a cause. Even revolutionary states such as the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China and Islamic Republic of Iran have had to balance radical ideology and national interest.

Two, the relative decline of US power and the emergence of a peer competitor like China have shrunk the margin for America's human rights diplomacy.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the US had the luxury of targeting different countries on human rights without a reference to economic and political costs. Now, the US will have to be a little more careful to avoid alienating its partners – current and potential.

Three, there is a profound crisis in the ideology of Western humanitarianism that gained so much traction after the Cold War. The interventions by Western states and non-state actors in other societies have more often than not produced disaster.

The interventions to promote democracy, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, have been far too costly and yet unsuccessful. There is declining political support in the American heartland for Washington's

foreign adventures in the name of democracy promotion. Some in the US are beginning to see that democracy and human rights are not an outsider's gifts to a society; they must evolve organically within.

Four, differences have emerged within the West and among the human rights groups. Consider, for example, the recent divergence between the US and France on the relationship between religion and state, on how to deal with Islamic radicalism in a democratic society and, more broadly, about the nature of identity politics.

There are also deepening differences between groups that support women's reproductive rights around the world and those wanting to ban abortions in the name of the right to life. Those demanding civil and political rights don't always agree with those that define religious freedom in specific ways.

Five, the crisis in US democracy can no longer be kept under wraps. America's credibility in preaching democracy has been dented severely in recent elections that have highlighted problems of political representation, the legitimacy of institutions like the Senate and the Electoral College, and electoral procedures. While Mr Trump's behaviour, including an attempted insurrection this week, has made it worse, there is no escaping the structural problems confronting the world's most powerful democracy.

PUTTING OWN HOUSE IN ORDER

Most single-issue groups in the US are unlikely to give up on their crusades for rights in other societies. But Mr Biden and his team have recognised the tension between the internal and external, and the importance of putting America's house in order. In his victory speech after the results of the election in early November, Mr Biden insisted that America at its best "is a beacon for the globe"; but he added that the US must "lead not by the example of our power, but by the power of our example".

In identifying the challenges ahead for his tenure, Mr Biden focused on the domestic rather than the foreign and pointed to the battles to "control the virus", "build prosperity", "secure your family's healthcare" and "root out systemic racism in this country".

But human rights are unlikely to disappear from the US agenda. Reacting to the sweeping arrests in Hong Kong this week, Mr Biden's nominee for Secretary of State Antony Blinken called them an "assault on those bravely advocating for universal rights".

Mr Blinken also promised that "the Biden-Harris administration will stand with the people of Hong Kong and against Beijing's crackdown on democracy". Translating this sentiment into consequential action, however, will not be easy for Washington.

In the end, selectivity and compromise are most likely to mark US human rights diplomacy in Asia.

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