



Insulting China Doesn't Advance American Goals

Doug Bandow

March 13, 2016

China is not known for its commitment to human rights. While the Chinese people remain much freer than during Mao Zedong's rule, President Xi Jinping has been cracking down on dissent inside and outside of the Communist Party. For good reason people of good will in America wish to encourage Beijing to better respect its citizens' civil and political liberties.

Unfortunately, gratuitously antagonizing the People's Republic of China isn't likely to help the Chinese people. Rather, doing so almost certainly will make Beijing less willing to make concessions to the U.S.

In 2009 Liu Xiaobo was sentenced to 11 years in prison for inciting state subversion. His crime? Circulating a petition advocating the end of one-party rule. Obviously, the Chinese Communist Party was not pleased. Liu's wife languishes under house arrest. And they are merely among the most celebrated of the PRC's many political prisoners, a disturbing number added since President Xi took office.

The U.S. Senate has approved a measure authored by presidential contender Ted Cruz to rename the land in front of the Chinese embassy from International Place to Liu Xiaobo Plaza. China's Foreign Ministry denounced the measure: "If the relevant bill is passed into law, it will cause serious consequences," said spokesman Hong Lei. What that would mean is unknown. On social media Chinese wags have proposed renaming the street in front of the U.S. embassy after NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden. (Of course, lauding someone who defied his government might backfire on the CCP.)

The White House promised to veto the bill. Said State Department spokesman Mark Toner: "We view this kind of legislative action as something that only complicates our efforts, so we oppose this approach." He said the president hoped "to work more productively and cooperatively with Congress" to improve human rights in China. Cruz responded by criticizing the administration's "eagerness to coddle an authoritarian Communist regime at the expense of pro-American dissidents."

Whatever one thinks of President Obama's foreign policy, he clearly has the better argument in this case. And it has nothing to do with "coddling" the Xi government or CCP.

Americans rightly support liberty overseas as well as at home. They understandably desire to help those who are oppressed by foreign governments. Quite reasonably, they want their leaders to be unabashed advocates internationally of Americans' shared values, especially individual liberty.

At the same time, most Americans recognize that foreign policy is the art of the possible — focused on protecting their collective interests. That means difficult trade-offs are inevitable. Especially since most foreign governments respond as does Washington when another state attempts to boss it around. They refuse and resist. Indeed, the more public the demands, the more difficult it is to force compliance since it is a rare regime prepared to publicly cave.

Moreover, one is tempted to ask, why China? The list of human rights offenders is long: North Korea, Eritrea, Vietnam, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, Uganda, Algeria, the Central Asian states, Egypt, and others. Will Congress name a street after a dissident from each of these countries as well?

In the case of China, the U.S. has much at stake. The two countries are engaged in a delicate dance over strengthening sanctions against North Korea. Washington also is very involved against the PRC in not-so-delicate territorial struggle in the waters of the Asia-Pacific. Beijing's economic policies in the midst of apparent decline will help determine global prosperity. The U.S. has pressed China to reduce its unrestricted support for dictatorial regimes such as Zimbabwe. If the Iran deal sours Washington will again be seeking Beijing's aid.

On all of these issues the two nations disagree, sometimes greatly. Deliberately antagonizing the PRC in a very public way will make progress on all of these issues more difficult. The point is not to be sensitive to the bruised egos of Chinese policymakers. The U.S. obviously is entitled to name its streets, irrespective of the opinions of foreign nations. Moreover, officials who jail their fellow citizens deserve to have their egos bruised.

Rather, the objective is to best advance U.S. policy objectives. Renaming the embassy's Washington, D.C. address won't do so. To the contrary, it will almost certainly encourage the government to continue holding Liu. And Beijing will be tempted to retaliate elsewhere, perhaps in an area of significant concern to the U.S.

That doesn't mean insult and embarrassment cannot be valid diplomatic tools. Rather, in that case it should be calculated, part of a larger strategy, and likely to improve Washington's leverage. Such a tactic should be treated as a means to an end, leverage to achieve a positive result. That isn't the case here.

A cynical presidential aspirant is seeking to boost his candidacy. Other legislators see a cheap vote, since they expect the president to block the bill and take the heat. No positive inducement is offered to improve the treatment of dissidents. Congress's collective thumb will be placed in China's eye, after which legislators will high five each other and move on to their next cheap photo op. Liu will continue to serve his term and his wife will continue to be stuck at home.

Better results are more likely from pressures applied out of the public view backed by a mix of positive and negative inducements. Indeed, private activism can support such an effort. Demonstrations and letter-writing can embarrass foreign officials without impairing the official bilateral relationship. The U.S. then can argue that defusing such protests is another reason for the offending government to release prisoners or changing policies. Citizen action also is a practical way for Americans to advance their values in an un-free world.

China deserves criticism for its treatment of dissenters, including Liu. Beijing should not fear its people. Indeed, until the PRC allows its citizens to freely participate in political life, it will find it tough to attain true global leadership. Washington should encourage China's journey. But the Senate vote won't do that.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry.