

Saving China's Uighurs: Can Washington Do the Impossible?

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August 15, 2019

Almost from the nation's beginning, Americans have sought to liberate their geographical neighborhood and the world beyond. Only a few years after winning independence, they debated aiding faraway Greeks fighting the Ottoman Empire, even though this was well beyond their means.

Two centuries later, a far more powerful United States faces a similar dilemma. There is a growing movement to "do something" about China's terrible treatment of its Muslim Uighur population, a million of whom (and perhaps far more) have been locked up in reeducation camps. Authoritarian, even totalitarian, controls have been imposed in Xinjiang province. The scope of oppression is breathtaking.

Writes the *Washington Post's* Josh Rogin: "Republicans and Democrats, isolationists and internationalists, the Trump administration and Congress, even Christians and Muslims all agree: This is a catastrophe the United States can no longer ignore." Several House members have written to express their dismay that "the administration has taken no meaningful action in response to the situation." They insist that the president come up with plans to hold "Beijing accountable" and "make clear to the Chinese government that the situation is a priority for the U.S. government."

Laments Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uighur Congress: "Each time the world swears never again. When will we actually mean it?" Yet what does "never again" mean when dealing with a major, well-armed power with nuclear weapons? During the Cold War, a much weaker People's Republic of China committed far worse crimes against its own people. Today, humanitarian military intervention is inconceivable: the result would be even worse human carnage. America certainly isn't going to war with the PRC.

Economic sanctions have become America's "go to" policy when it dislikes what other countries are doing. However, Beijing is a far more significant power than those nations typically targeted. China's commercial ties extend through Asia and Europe and on to Africa and even Latin America.

Trade penalties have proven ineffective even when applied against weaker nations, including Russia, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Cuba, and Venezuela. At best, those sanctions helped push

some, like Tehran, to the negotiating table. But in no case did those countries change their internal policies.

Indeed, sanctions do more to hurt the people than their governments. Consider the infamous exchange with UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright, who, when pressed to justify the deaths of a half million Iraqi children due to sanctions, asserted: “We think the price is worth it.” Someone should have asked the Iraqis.

In response to such criticism, the U.S. insists that it’s now imposing “smart” sanctions, punishing those believed to be responsible for offensive policies. However, the leaders of hostile states rarely bank or vacation in America. Some of their supporters might enjoy the West’s good life, but Russia’s oligarchs are still unlikely to overthrow their czar anytime soon.

In the case of China, it’s been suggested that we sanction Chen Quanguo, Xinjiang’s party chief and Politburo member (who previously kept brutal order in Tibet). Doing so might represent “the determination not to turn a blind eye,” as Rogin puts it, though not much more. That won’t change anything in Beijing.

Indeed, the Uighur Human Rights Policy Act, pending in both houses, is mostly hortatory. The bill demands that the administration do something, such as condemn Chinese abuses, impose Magnitsky Act penalties against select Chinese officials, ban the export of technologies used for repression, and protect Uighurs and others in the U.S. from Chinese harassment.

Protecting Chinese of any background living in America is worthwhile, but well-nigh impossible when relatives remain in the PRC. Indeed, China is reportedly seeking to create a database of Uighurs living abroad and their relatives left in Xinjiang, in order to more effectively pressure the former.

Sophie Richardson of Human Rights Watch urges the targeting of American companies tied to Chinese firms “engaged one way or another in repression in Xinjiang.” That would be morally satisfying, but it would not stop other nations’ businesses from stepping in. China will have no trouble manning and servicing its camps.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi argues: “The administration must demonstrate the moral courage to use its economic leverage to not only guarantee fair trade for American products in Chinese markets, but also to advance human rights in China.” Similarly, as regards Hong Kong, Amnesty International’s Francisco Bencosme observes, “While the U.S. is negotiating trade agreements, I think it’s important to remember that history is not going to remember the details of the negotiations but where the United States was on this massive human rights issue.”

But what to do? Impose human rights tariffs? Embargo all trade? And would the objective be to close the camps or liberate Xinjiang? To kill Hong Kong’s extradition bill or force democratic rule?

And what of the many other human rights violations—attacks on religious liberty, arrests of human rights lawyers, creation of a totalitarian “social credit” system, restrictions on academic exchanges and internet access, and much more? Is there any reason to believe that a rising nationalist power would cave on such issues? If not, then just “doing something” would be for our benefit, not that of the oppressed.

Congress also recently targeted China's ongoing crackdown in Hong Kong. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said that if Hong Kong approves the proposed extradition bill, "the Congress has no choice but to reassess whether Hong Kong is 'sufficiently autonomous' under the 'one country, two systems' framework" to maintain existing trade preferences. Legislation has been introduced to reaffirm Washington's commitment to human rights in Hong Kong, certify the sufficiency of the territory's autonomy, and impose personal sanctions on those responsible for violating liberties.

If the Special Administrative Region loses its special status, then it should lose any corresponding trade preferences. Nevertheless, the threat to strip away trade benefits won't change Beijing's behavior. If millions of demonstrators can't sway Hong Kong and Beijing authorities, American economic penalties won't do so. The SAR matters ever less economically to China and Chinese leadership will not yield control of a territory they only regained a couple decades ago.

Michael Mazza of the American Enterprise Institute proposes that the U.S. boycott the 2022 China Winter Olympic Games to protest Beijing's Xinjiang practices. If the International Olympics Committee was deciding where to schedule the next games, denying them to the PRC would be sensible punishment. However, a unilateral boycott—Mazza expressed the likely forlorn hope that Washington could convince others to go along and the IOC to cancel or relocate the competition—would merely be an exercise in moral vanity. It would be a particularly curious statement if tourists and businessmen filled planes headed for China while American athletes were stuck at home.

So far the administration has resisted pressure to act. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo unconvincingly claimed that he has raised human rights "in multiple conversations." However, the administration values human rights only as a foreign policy weapon against particularly hated adversaries. Punishing the PRC would also interfere with other important policy objectives, such as moving North Korea toward denuclearization.

Nor is China the only country that offends American values. For example, during the contested redo of Istanbul's mayoral race, Bloomberg's Eli Lake contended that the issue should be "at the top of the U.S. agenda with Turkey." Yet what could Washington have done? President Recep Tayyip Erdogan felt threatened by the initial opposition victory: holding onto power was his priority and would have trumped any threat from Washington. Moreover, were the U.S. government seen to be allying with the opposition, it might prove to be more burden than asset in a nationalist state with significant anti-American sentiments. American intervention might also have spurred Erdogan to do whatever was necessary to ensure his party's victory.

History has not ended and horrific violations of human rights abound across the globe. Alas, America's desire to redress injustice far outstrips its ability to do so. Even when addressing offenses like the mass incarceration of China's Uighurs, prudence remains a virtue. Best would be for the administration to encourage creation of a global coalition to address these horrific problems.

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