



When Hawks Advocate a Human Rights-Oriented Foreign Policy, You Know It Isn't About Human Rights

Doug Bandow

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Foreign policy tends to be complicated and messy. International issues create an explosive imbroglio mixing economic, political, and security controversies. Human rights upsets almost every calculation since America's friends can be even crueler than its foes.

The Trump administration cared not at all about humanitarian issues. Political prisoners were only convenient weapons, useful against adversaries but forgotten with allies. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's cynicism was exceeded only by his sanctimony when it came to the issue.

Members of the Biden administration care more about such issues but have little credibility to preach to the world. The president and most of his top officials were drawn from the Obama administration, which aided the murderous Saudis in their aggressive war against Yemen. The Obama retreads supported radical jihadist insurgents against Syria's Assad government. U.S. officials refused to call Egyptian Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's coup a coup. And they supported a gaggle of America's "usual suspects," allies which killed and jailed opponents with equal aplomb.

In fact, the Obama administration made little pretense about supporting human rights. Its claim to have entered Libya's civil war for humanitarian purposes was a shameful fake and fraud. Muammar Khadafy was a dictator, but contra the administration he had massacred no civilians and his threats of future retribution were directed against combatants. Nevertheless, the Obama administration misled China and Russia into approving a UN resolution which authorized an operation to protect civilians – and used the opportunity to impose regime change. It was cynical Trumpism before Trump.

Moreover, the practical difficulties in promoting human rights are enormous. Some advocates seem to believe that the president merely need pronounce his or her judgment and humanity will rush to comply. However, that isn't the way of the world. History didn't work that way during the early American republic, Cold War, or unipolar moment. And it certainly doesn't work that way now.

For instance, China dominates attention today, but where to start? There are multiple humanitarian concerns. Hong Kong. And the Uyghurs. Religious persecution. And internet censorship. The destruction of the human rights bar. And closure of reformist NGOs. The social credit system. And the end of independent journalism. Plus much, much more. How to force Beijing to change just one of these policies, let alone all of them? Especially since *they all have been getting worse* over the last decade, especially since Xi Jinping's rise.

Add to these other countries judged to be foreign policy threats: Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Conclude with America's allies, partners, and friends – several of whom are aggressors, murderers, and oppressors, often using US weapons, acting with US support, and benefiting from US protection. The contrast between Pompeo movingly criticizing human rights violations in Iran before jetting off to Riyadh, where he spent his entire visit obsequiously kowtowing to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other Saudi royals as they locked up their critics, was as appalling as it was embarrassing.

Moreover, how do human rights issues relate to questions of security, economics, and geopolitics? Regarding China, there are many important concerns on the policy table – trade, economic policies, arms control, IP theft, nonproliferation, COVID-19, cyber warfare, North Korea, territorial claims, Taiwan, Belt and Road Initiative. Several of these have degenerated into serious and bitter disputes; none of them have been resolved in recent years.

Emotionally, such practical matters pale in comparison to oppression of the human person and spirit. However, keeping Americans safe and free, and able to pursue prosperous and happy lives, are the core responsibilities of the national government. It was created by the newly independent colonists to protect their interests, not run endless crusades at their expense.

Foreign policy practitioners rarely have offered a sensible synthesis. A bloodless realism which ignores everyone and everything else is unsatisfactory. A willingness to sacrifice Americans' fundamental interests – and the lives and wealth of Americans when no interests are present – for abstract ideas also fails.

Equally serious is the lack of effective tools to implement a foreign policy focused on human rights. War is not a humanitarian instrument even in the best case. In the worst instance it is a catastrophe, such as Iraq: hundreds of thousands of civilians died in the ensuing sectarian conflict which ravaged their nation and malformed their political system.

Sanctions are little better. Targeted Magnitsky Act measures amount to little more than virtue signaling, allowing administrations and legislators to claim to care. Occasionally perpetrators are inconvenienced. But what people has been freed or tyrant overthrown as a result? Broader penalties have greater effect but usually hurt the innocent. Comfortable, well-fed American analysts insist that Washington impoverish and starve residents of Syria and Venezuela in order to impose regime change – yet the promised better life never arrives. And diplomatic criticism of atrocious behavior usually results in harmless but ineffective talk, little more.

Most problematic are the war hawks who claim to magically morph into humanitarian warriors. For instance, *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens recently offered his prescription for the Biden administration. He played a Pompeo mini-me, assuming that only governments he otherwise wanted to see overthrown should be confronted over human rights.

Stephens advocated "pursuing a foreign policy that puts dissidents first." America's adversaries cannot be stopped by bombs or sanctions, he contended. But "What *can* bring dictatorships down is a credible domestic opposition that galvanizes public indignation through acts of exposure, mockery and heroic defiance."

So, he apparently would refuse to deal with any adversary that treated its people badly. Wrote Stephens: "Should China want US tariffs eased? Negotiable – but not while [Jimmy] Lai faces trial and [Ilham] Thoti is in prison. Would Russia like to see US sanctions eased on Kremlin-favored oligarchs like Oleg Deripaska? Conceivable – but not while [Alexei] Navalny is under arrest and has to fear for his life. Would Iran like to resume nuclear negotiations? Then let [Nasrin] Sotoudeh, [Alireza] Alinejad and every other political case in Evin Prison go."

The first question is how Stephens would apply this approach to Saudi Arabia – delivering murder and mayhem in Yemen, slicing and dicing journalists, jailing dissidents, and more. How about requiring the release of blogger Raif Badawi before buying more oil or selling more warplanes? No more cash for brutal Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi until he releases the tens of thousands of political prisoners rounded up since he took power in a coup? And a halt to financial aid, weapons sales, and political cover for Israel until it ends its half century occupation over millions of Palestinians?

Add Turkey, Bahrain, Morocco, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, the Central Asian states, India, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, and more to the list. America's obligations are greatest when it comes to nations which Washington is subsidizing, defending, protecting, praising, and enabling as they crush their people underfoot. Supporting these human rights abusers turns Americans into criminal accomplices.

One of the moments of unintended hilarity created by Pompeo was when he introduced his initiative for unalienable rights at the United Nations. He was joined by 56 other nations, 46 of which were ranked as Not Free or Partly Free by the group Freedom House. Riyadh was one of his featured advocates, presenting a veritable totalitarian state with no political or religious liberty as a proponent of American freedom values! The mind boggles. Which is why his initiatives and claims were consistently treated as cynical cant.

The second question is why Stephens would ask for so little. Is he really ready to offer trade concessions to Beijing if it frees just two people? Then the Chinese Communist Party gets a pass on everything else? That would be quite a deal which XI Jinping might be happy to strike.

If not, however, then what would be the price? Is releasing 100,000 Uyghurs enough? Or must 200,000 get to go home? Assume China unexpectedly closes the reeducation camps. Is that enough? Or must religious persecution end? The Internet be freed? Full democracy be enshrined? No one imagines that other governments will dismantle their oppressive political structures on Washington's demand because maintaining power is their top objective. Certainly a rising nationalistic power like China won't do so.

Heck, Americans wouldn't yield to another country's demands. Imagine Great Britain, the French Republic, Imperial Russia, Prussia, or Spain making political demands of the new republic in return for commercial advantages. The response would have been the same as Americans' actual angry reaction during the infamous XYZ Affair when France's foreign minister demanded a bribe to negotiate: "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute."

In fact, taken seriously, Stephens' idea would act as true isolationism, cutting off American contact with much of the rest of the world. It might seem like an act of high principle, playing the Vestal Virgin and refusing to engage the rest of a dirty and evil world. Yet this approach would forgo the opportunity to influence other countries through contact, suasion, example, and more gentle forms of pressure. And it would sacrifice every other interest – security, economic, political – while doing little or nothing to improve human rights.

Which leaves US policy searching for a pragmatic balance. How to promote both values and interests? How to offer a principled rather than cynical model for other nations? How to temper expectations without yielding to despair?

In the end, Washington should act to protect its citizens and advance their interests. However, it should do so in a moral manner, taking the rights and interests of other peoples into consideration. Liberty is both a moral and practical good and should be promoted by the US, but the strategy for doing so should be pragmatic, respecting the reality of international affairs.

Almost every human rights initiative runs into the ugly reality of international life: America's ability to force change is very limited. That doesn't mean Washington should abandon any effort to do good. However, Americans should temper their expectations. And remember both the complexity and reality of foreign policy, especially how governments consistently demonstrate prove better at creating disasters than utopias.

Finally, America's greatest influence and obligation comes through its own behavior. The starting point should be first do no harm, essentially applying the Hippocratic Oath to foreign policy. In encouraging other nations to change their policies, Washington should balance other interests, particularly security and economics. And Americans should play the long game, working outside of government to influence and empower other peoples so the latter can ultimately reform their own societies.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.