

Chen Case Highlights Delicate Nature of Human Rights in US-Sino Relations

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Scott Stearns | Washington

So where does the Chen Guangcheng case leave U.S./China relations and Washington's role as a champion of human rights?

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says the agreement ending Chen's six-day stay at the U.S. embassy in Beijing "reflected his choices and our values."

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Liu Weimin, says Washington must apologize for what Beijing considers interfering in Chinese domestic affairs and for taking in a Chinese citizen in such an "irregular manner." He told China's Xinhua news agency that Beijing authorities will investigate and punish all those responsible for helping Chen escape house arrest.

"I think it has always been a challenge for the United States," says Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington research group. "The U.S. stands for very basic human rights issues. The U.S. promotes democracy. The U.S. talks about these issues. If you are dealing front-and-center with another very important country, it is hard to get away from those."

Getting Chen out of the embassy allows Secretary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to focus on the broader global issues at the center of this annual economic and political dialogue in Beijing.

"We cannot make them treat their people better," Bandow said. "If you make this kind of the center of your dispute, you are not going to get anything else done."

"So I think the desperate attempt then is to say, 'Let's talk about these things, but let's be able to set them aside when we have to go and talk about Sudan, go and talk about North Korea, Iran, economic issues, all these other things,'" Bandow added.

But the director of Human Rights Watch China, Sophie Richardson, says it's a mistake to consider human rights as distinct from other U.S./China issues.

"Whether you are talking about product safety; whether you're talking about the validity or the efficacy of trade negotiations; and whether contracts can be upheld, those are fundamentally premised on some basic human rights protections," Richardson says.

While Washington has been strong on some specific cases, including Chen Guangcheng's, Richardson believes the Obama administration's overall performance on human rights in China is uneven.

"In making the case for better human rights protections in China - not just as a peculiar interest of the U.S.'s, but as being in the interest of the Chinese people - there has been some great language on that," Richardson noted. "But I don't think this administration has done a particularly good job of coordinating across the breadth and the depth of the relationship in the service of better protecting human rights issues."

U.S. officials traveling with secretaries Clinton and Geithner say Beijing's response to the Chen case, especially following the ouster of Chongqing Communist Party leader Bo Xilai, reflects a growing disconnect between central and local authority in China.

A senior Obama administration official told reporters in Beijing that Chen "expressed his desire for assistance from the central government in addressing his concerns and grievances, primarily relating to his reported mistreatment and that of his family at the hands of local officials."

And central government officials "further stated that they will investigate reported extralegal activities committed by local Shandong authorities against Mr. Chen and his family."

"Some of the people who have been persecuted in a most brutal way, like Chen Guangcheng, haven't actually called for the ouster of the Chinese Communist Party," Richardson said. "They have called for upholding the rule of law as it is on the books. And some of the people who have been vocal proponents of continuing Party rule have not been protected as a result of that, Bo Xilai being the best case in point."

Richardson believes the pressure for systemic change in China is only growing.

"People see both in Chen's so-called escape from Shandong and in Bo Xilai's ouster the opportunity for change," Richardson explained. "And that the system is not immutable. And that the senior level leadership has to respond to these kinds of social demands, whether they are about corruption, whether they are about inequality, whether they are about abusive family-planning practices. Simply imposing policies from above and ignoring the fallout, I think, has ceased to be an option."

That seems especially true given Beijing's reaction to the events of the Arab Spring and its continuing support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"I think the leadership is extremely nervous," Doug Bandow noted. "They sit on a volcano. I mean, this is a ruling party that has essentially no legitimacy other than economic prosperity. You have the princelings, people who are kind of living on the legacy of the Communist Party. But this is a very different Communist Party. Issues like corruption bother the Chinese people."

In the short term, Bandow says that concern makes Party leaders clamp down on dissent. But over the long-term, he says it may help bring about change.

"I think there are at least some, like the current premier, who recognize that if you don't allow those kind of release mechanisms, you make it much more dangerous," Bandow says.

"The paranoia has clearly been heightened," says Sophie Richardson. "This is not a representative government. It's not one that is interested in having a conversation in any sort of systematic way with the population as a whole about what people want."

Richardson believes the attention surrounding the Chen Guangcheng and Bo Xilai cases is a "tremendous opportunity for the United States and others who have a stated interest in human rights issues to not just say that they welcome China's rise, meaning the government, but indeed to welcome the rise of people's activism and their efforts to hold their own government to account."

"I think we're at a moment, historically, when governments like the U.S. have to start thinking about a broader relationship with the Chinese people, not just a government that we know is not necessarily representative of popular sentiment."