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Will 'Engaging' China, Myanmar Improve Their Human Rights Records?

by Andrew F. Tully

WASHINGTON -- The White House says the best way to ensure human rights for Tibetans living under Chinese rule is for other countries to engage China, not to lecture it.

The subject came up October 6 at the White House press briefing when a reporter asked spokesman Robert Gibbs why President Barack Obama is delaying his meeting with the Dalai Lama -- who's in Washington this week -- until after the U.S. leader travels to Beijing next month to meet Chinese President Hu Jintao.

Tibetans say China has illegally occupied its land for 50 years. China considers the exiled Dalai Lama a separatist and is opposed to world leaders meeting with him.

Gibbs was asked if the meeting was delayed because of concern about the reaction of the Chinese government. Gibbs replied that Obama's concern is for both the Chinese and the Tibetans.

"I think the statement that the Dali Lama and his supporters put out yesterday, were fully in support of a meeting that will take place later in the year," Gibbs said. "They understand a strong relationship -- the stronger relationship that we have with China benefits the Tibetan people."

That's just as it should be, says Christopher Preble, the director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, a policy think tank in Washington.

Preble says it may be difficult to engage with a government that has as questionable a record as China's on human rights, but it's the best way to bring about change.

"I think that we need to engage China as we have been doing for decades now. We do so on the belief -- I think not entirely naive -- that their integration into the global economy, into the global political order, will over time tend to moderate their behavior," Preble says.

"I think in some respects it already has, and I think that's the right approach. I think we should continue to engage China, and I think that sometimes these kinds of trade-offs are difficult, but they're what policymakers have to do every day."

'Common Concerns'

After all, Preble argues, besides their differences, the United States and China have what he calls "many areas of common concern," ranging from wanting North Korea to abandon its nuclear-weapons program to bilateral trade.

But that's just the problem, says Sophie Richardson, the Asia advocacy director at the Washington offices of Human Rights Watch. She thinks Washington's decision to delay the meeting contributes to a perception, particularly in Beijing, that Obama's more interested in trade than human rights.

Richardson notes that the "temporary rebuff of the Dalai Lama" follows statements by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Beijing in February that "human rights weren't going to interfere with other issues in the bilateral relationship, or the State Department consistently using this formulation in public that the U.S. and China are not going to 'see eye-to-eye' on human rights issues."

Human Rights Watch finds this "particularly problematic," Richardson says, "partly because it suggests that the administration isn't even going to try to persuade the Chinese government to do a better job of respecting human rights."

In Richardson's view, it's short-sighted to believe that through trade China will come to respect the rule of law and a flow of information to its people.

'Engaging' Myanmar

Meanwhile, the United States has also strengthened its contacts with Myanmar, the Southeast Asian country that has been ruled since 1962 by a military junta.

Is this the same as engaging China? Not really, says the Cato Institute's Preble. He says there are "less reasons for the United States to work with a country like Myanmar," which has an "even worse" human rights record than China.

"And what, exactly, do we expect to obtain from them in return? What is it, exactly, that they bring to the table?" Preble asks.

But in terms of engaging with Myanmar, and "using engagement as a means of opening up the regime," then Preble says it's a similar situation as that with China.

"You have to take it on a case-by-case basis. It seems to me that the burden is on the leaders in Burma to come to the table with something of value to the United States and to the global community," Preble says. "As it is, they're just really a pariah."

Still, he believes some form of engagement with Burma is probably a good idea.

But Richardson says Human Rights Watch is also disappointed in the Obama administration's approach to Myanmar. She says engagement is fine, just as with China, but mere engagement doesn't go far enough for a country like the United States, which is supposed to be a beacon of human rights.

"'Engagement' is such a misinterpreted term because the opposite of it means that there's no contact at all. And there are very few countries in the world with which the U.S. government has no contact," Richardson says.

"And so, from our perspective it's less a question about whether there is engagement -- we're not opposed to people talking to each other -- but rather the [Obama] administration being incredibly clear about what sorts of progress it expects the [Myanmar regime to] make."

Richardson says she understands why the Obama administration would want to avoid "preaching from the pulpit" to countries like China and Myanmar. But she says that rejecting that particular strategy means adopting a new one.

So far, she says, there's no evidence that the United States has done that.

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