



The fall of the Berlin Wall - November 1989 (Gavin Stuart, January 30, 2006)

The New Geopolitics of Human Rights

By Seth D. Kaplan

As economic and military strength become more evenly distributed among major actors around the globe, ideas are taking on an outsized role in geopolitics. In the United States' effort to outcompete China, Russia, and other rivals, its ideas are likely to play a defining role in determining the strength of alliances and the vulnerability of foes. The more its ideas have an inherent appeal based on their universality—transcending culture and context—the more likely the United States will be able to leverage them to forge a coalition that can withstand geopolitical threats and apply pressure for reform in places like China.

During the Cold War, America's security enabled its ideas to flourish; the latter complemented the former in a virtuous cycle. By winning over elites and populations to its ideas (which were shared across the West but promoted most assertively by Washington), it built partnerships, added countries to its orbit, and eventually converted many behind the Iron Curtain—strengthening its alliances and thus security while weakening those of the communist bloc in the process. As such, while a robust nuclear weapons program and military deterred direct aggression, they were at best defensive measures that provided time and space for the United States to strengthen its position by promoting several core ideas: capitalism, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights.¹

Human rights played a prominent role in the American arsenal. They contributed to the wave of democratization that started in the 1970s in Southern Europe and spread across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, securing many allies along the way. Starting in the 1960s and building steam with the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which tied Soviet-American trade to the treatment of Jewish refuseniks, and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which inspired the establishment of human rights monitoring groups across the Soviet Bloc, human rights slowly worked to undermine the legitimacy of the entire communist enterprise—achieving America's most important security goal without the use of force.²

The coming decades will likely see another protracted battle, this one with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Although the fight for global supremacy will be the same, the nature of the competition will inevitably be different given China's economic dynamism, the two country's interdependencies, and the great cultural gaps. China's enormous economic clout presents a particularly difficult challenge. It is the world's largest exporter,³ trading more with 128—and twice as much with 90—of the World Trade Organization's 190 members than the

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United States in 2018.⁴ It is one of the two largest suppliers (with the United States) of grants and loans to developing countries,⁵ and was, for the first time, the largest recipient of foreign investment in 2020.⁶

Despite its economic strength, the CCP is vulnerable to any competition of ideas centered on human rights. Since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, China has imprisoned over a million Muslim Uighurs in internment camps because of their faith and ethnicity, detained hundreds of lawyers and grassroots activists, closed churches across the country, and arrested scores of people in Hong Kong just for protesting. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's State Department determined that China was engaged in a genocide, noting that its mistreatment of the Uighurs extended even to their most intimate matters: "PRC authorities have conducted forced sterilizations and abortions on Uighur women, coerced them to marry non-Uighurs, and separated Uighur children from their families." His successor, Anthony Blinken, quickly concurred.⁷

We clearly need to leverage American ideas to face China's rising influence, yet the idea of human rights has been badly tarnished. Instead of reflecting a common, universal heritage, human rights are too often politicized, oriented around Western concerns, and cheapened as they grow in number. This both diminishes their appeal and enables foreign leaders to oppose them on charges of imperialism. The Commission on Unalienable Rights, which the U.S. State Department established in 2019 to address the severity of this human rights recession, states in its final report, "in today's multipolar world... it is plain to see that the ambitious human rights project of the past century is in crisis. The broad consensus that once supported the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) principles is more fragile than ever, even as gross violations of human rights and dignity continue apace."⁸

How can the United States restore this consensus? A return to basics in how it promotes human

rights will strengthen alliances with other countries—alliances that will be needed to challenge China and to catalyze pressure from within to delegitimize the regime among the population. This would replicate the formula that made human rights so essential to America's victory in the Cold War.

How Human Rights Helped Win the Cold War

Although the idea of human rights barely existed before World War II and there was resistance to its universality after it, the concept came to have striking influence on East–West relations during the later years of the Cold War. This influence, however, took time to emerge and depended on a series of initiatives that put rights at center stage. Looking closer at the historical dynamics that led to human rights' success can help us find a pathway to restore their influence in the decades ahead.

Despite the adoption of the UDHR in 1948, human rights did not start to play a major role in Western thinking until concerns over civil rights began to emerge in a significant segment of Western populations. In 1961, Amnesty International was established to campaign for political prisoners and human rights worldwide. Starting in the United Kingdom, it evolved to develop chapters in many European countries as well as the United States, with each dedicated to forming small groups of members to campaign on behalf of specific adopted prisoners. Support for a more proactive human rights effort grew stronger as decolonization created dozens of new states (who immediately became advocates); the crisis in Rhodesia in 1965 pushed the U.S. to take a stronger stand (to win the new states to its side in the Cold War); and the Greek coup in 1967 produced concerns over the treatment of prisoners in what was considered the birthplace of democracy.

In contrast, the Soviet Union actively supported human rights internationally—especially with regard to decolonization, economic and social

rights, and women's rights—from early on, even while the regime was repressive at home. This came back to haunt it when a movement among its *intelligentsia* emerged in the mid-1960s. As Eric D. Weitz writes, the vocabulary of rights entered the country's discourse through its leaders' use of the term at the United Nations—most notably, Andrei Gromyko in 1947 and Nikita Khrushchev in 1960—and the country's active participation in its Commission on Human Rights. The loud proclamation of rights within the country's own constitutions—1936 as well as 1977—were then used to demand the right to free speech, assembly, and emigration and an end to the extra-judicial, callous treatment of those who dared to violate these. Eventually, the homegrown activists emerging from the *intelligentsia* movement formed a number of organizations (e.g., Initiative Group to Defend Human Rights in the USSR, Moscow Human Rights Committee) and drew upon the UDHR to internationalize their movement, helping to spur Western support.⁹

Among these activists, Jews seeking religious freedom or the right to emigrate from the Soviet Union became prominent voices, especially after the Israeli victory in the 1967 war. These refusniks—including Anatoly Shcharansky—attracted significant sympathy in the United States, where the large Soviet Jewry Movement developed to promote their rights. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment was passed in 1974—over the opposition of the Nixon administration—tying American trade to the issuance of exit visas. However, the Soviet Union reduced rather than increased emigration and suppressed dissent (Shcharansky was imprisoned in 1977 and spent nine years in jail).

The turning point came in 1975 with the Helsinki Final Act, an agreement among members of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (now known as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe). The accord had been originally sought by the Soviet Union in

order to secure its hegemony in Eastern Europe. It was designed to reduce tensions by securing common recognition of the post-World War II European boundaries, incorporating commitments to safeguard human rights and expand travel, communication, and information flow between the two blocs as the price for Western support.¹⁰ Moscow was reluctant to accept these terms but it believed any challenges to its rule that they brought could be easily crushed.

The agreement spurred the establishment of human rights monitoring groups—most notably the Moscow Helsinki Group—across the Eastern Bloc. It, Sarah Snyder writes, detailed rights violations on “issues as varied as national self-determination, the right to choose one's residence, emigration and the right of return, freedom of belief, the right to monitor human rights, the right to a fair trial, the rights of political prisoners, and the abuse of psychiatry.” In time, it would report on its own members' arrests.¹¹

The formation of the Moscow Helsinki Group catalyzed the development of a network of monitoring groups both within the Soviet Union—in places such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Lithuania—and abroad. These, in turn, spurred further organized dissent as activists, journalists, lawyers, and diplomats worked across borders to publicize the jailing of dissidents and the government repression within communist countries. Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 (established in 1977) and Poland's Solidarity (established in 1980), both of which would go on to play prominent roles in the 1989 roll back of communism in Eastern Europe, were offshoots; two of many initiatives inspired by the original group in Moscow. Helsinki Watch (today Human Rights Watch), established in the United States in 1977, supported these myriad efforts by compiling comprehensive reports on specific issues and promoting the cause through the media and participation in CSCE meetings. The Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), founded in 1982 by leading

monitoring groups, both increased the weight of the organizations' criticisms in international debates and helped the groups within the Soviet Bloc withstand the rising crackdown.

This altered and energized international landscape, combined with greater orientation toward civic causes domestically, made human rights a much greater theme in American foreign policy starting in the mid-1970s. Congress established the human rights bureau within the U.S. State Department in 1976. President Jimmy Carter's declared in his inaugural address in 1977 that "Our commitment to human rights must be absolute"¹² and then tried to make the issue a prominent part of his foreign policy. He corresponded with Andrei Sakharov and criticized East Bloc countries over their repression in a way previously not done.¹³

While he started off hesitant, President Ronald Reagan became an enthusiastic supporter of human rights during his time in office, at least partly, as an internal State Department memo wrote, because it helped in the "Battle for Western Opinion"—winning support on the left and right at home and in Western Europe—and because it offered "the best opportunity to convey what is ultimately at issue in our contest with the Soviet bloc."¹⁴ He repeatedly used the bully pulpit to speak out, most famously in Berlin in 1987 when he challenged Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down" the Berlin Wall. When Reagan visited Moscow in 1988, he applauded the progress Gorbachev was making in reforming his country but demanded more, asking for further improvement, especially on the freedoms of religion, speech, and travel.¹⁵

In the end, Eastern Europe freed itself and the Soviet Union dissolved. Snyder explains how,

Protest movements inspired in part by Helsinki principles; reforms formulated in part to comply with Helsinki commitments; and new leaders, many of whom were active in Helsinki groups, all came to the fore... internal and external forces

advocated for a new relationship between the state and society in Eastern Europe.¹⁶

Ambition and Ascendant Authoritarianism

Today, the human rights field has mostly failed to inspire this kind of international movement to support people threatened by authoritarianism, most notably in China. There are many activists on the mainland and in Hong Kong and a number of major human rights organizations outside the country promoting rights in it. But there is nothing like the war of ideas or international pressure on the regime that compares to what happened during the Cold War.

China's economic success, deep trade linkages with countries around the world, huge investment in infrastructure in many countries (most notably through the Belt and Road Initiative), and the CCP's generally high popularity at home can partly explain why it pays little price for its suppression of Christianity and Islam; mass detention, surveillance, and even forced separation of parents and children who are ethnic Uighurs; silencing of dissidents on the mainland; and actions in Hong Kong that turned one of the world's freest places into one with severe political restrictions. Countries are reluctant to criticize a country they depend so much on—even Muslim countries that freely disparage the United States and other Western democracies for far lesser flaws don't criticize Beijing. But economics don't explain the whole problem; the human rights field's evolution since the Cold War is also responsible.

Human rights face a growing backlash in many countries because leaders feel the emerging agenda does not represent their values and needs. In such places, there is not necessarily a disagreement with the broad goals, but rather, as Brazilian academic Oliver Stuenkel writes, the "operationalization of liberal norms," and the "implicit and explicit hierarchies of international institutions" that privilege Western countries and concerns.¹⁷ Freedom House reports



Close to two million people hit the streets on Sunday (16th June 2019) to call on the Hong Kong government to withdraw a controversial extradition bill. (Etan Liam, June 16, 2019)

that democracy, which is practically synonymous with human rights in the West, “is under assault and in retreat around the globe.”¹⁸ The organization’s measurements of political rights and civil liberties have registered 14 consecutive years of decline.¹⁹ Meanwhile, foreign-funded civil society organizations that promote human rights are increasingly viewed suspiciously. This is true not only in authoritarian regimes such as Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Sudan, Egypt, and Venezuela, but also democracies such as Mexico, Malaysia, Nigeria, Hungary, and Israel, all of which have passed or are considering passing legislation regulating the sector.²⁰

There are many reasons for this pushback, but the most important is the overweening dual ambition born of success. Human rights advocates have broadened the scope of issues covered by human

rights while narrowing the room for differences in bringing those rights to life. Whereas once the focus was on upholding human dignity in places such as China by safeguarding a small number of basic rights—freedoms of religion and speech, protection from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, access to fair and fast trials—today the number of rights, and rights claims, has risen steeply as various well-meaning special interest groups have sought to harness the moral authority of the human rights idea to their causes.²¹

Calls to make everything from access to the internet to free employment counseling a human right have cheapened the meaning and multiplied the clashes of rights. China can, for example, correctly claim that it is doing quite well on most rights even if it is locking up dissidents, crushing free speech, imprisoning people because of their religious



Egyptian security forces fire tear gas canisters in to a large crowd of protesters gathered near the Ministry of Interior. (Alisdare Hickson, February 4, 2012)

identities, and preventing some citizens from traveling abroad. Yet, as Jacob Mchangama and Guglielmo Verdirame, co-founders of the Freedom Rights Project, note with disappointment, “much of the human rights community has not only shied away from expressing qualms about rights proliferation, it has often led the process.”²² In addition to supporting rights inflation, human rights activists have invited controversy—something the UDHR drafters knew could only hurt their cause—by often emphasizing new or novel interpretations of rights with no historical basis and giving them unequal weight.

Meanwhile, attempts to enforce a uniform conception of rights has reduced the space for local actors to formulate their own pathways,²³ fueling skepticism about the rights themselves and even criticism that they are just another plank in the long reach of Western imperialism. Today’s human rights

discourse is controlled by advocacy organizations, lobbyists, academics, and journalists that share a remarkably similar interpretation of rights based on individualistic Western normative assumptions that are controversial even in the West—and quite different from those that underlaid the human rights project in its first few decades. This naturally excludes those who have a more communitarian or religious vision of the good life—arguably a significant majority of the world’s population—undermining the very legitimacy of human rights in their eyes. As a result, governments can hide behind the cultural card when criticized precisely because of the unease created by the overly narrow approach adopted. This holds back efforts aimed at separating legitimate cultural concerns from criticisms that merely advance the interests of self-serving leaders and governments abroad.

These changes ignore the historical dynamics that led to human rights' success. The Universal Declaration, the foundation for much of the post-World War II rights project, sticks to a modest set of principles that no nation would wish openly to disavow, principles that can inspire people across different cultures by appealing to a common sense of what everyone could believe was morally binding. It focuses only on a small number of rights, and avoids issues that would in any way be controversial. Moreover, only a handful of the rights are considered core "primary rights" specifying strict restrictions on things like torture, enslavement, degrading punishment, discrimination, and limits to religious freedom. The rest of the rights are meant to be flexibly interpreted depending on the context.²⁴

This suggests that although all rights in the UDHR are important and need to be upheld, there is universal agreement that a few have special priority and thus require more rigid enforcement in all contexts—the very rights that emerged as flashpoints during the Cold War due to the work of the Moscow Helsinki Group and Amnesty International in its early years. This idea is echoed in the many subsequent human rights treaties that have a set of legally-binding, non-derogable or emergency-proof rights.²⁵ (In contrast, many of the emerging rights have little basis in international agreements. For example, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights may be important, but they do not appear in any major global agreement because there is no international consensus on them—and many countries are opposed to the idea. Women's rights, on the other hand, were recognized in the Declaration—it uses phrases such as "all human beings" and gender neutral language.

Western human rights organizations have also enlarged the international legal infrastructure that supports their efforts, creating state-like supranational institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), and multilateral doctrines

such as the "Responsibility to Protect," over which they have significant influence. But these have limited support outside the West; even democracies such as Brazil and South Africa are at best ambivalent. Moreover, they only focus on countries with weaker geopolitical standing—as of this writing, all 29 cases taken up by the ICC are in Africa²⁶—because states such as China refuse to join and can block referrals. The ICC, for example, has no jurisdiction on cases within China, while governments such as Syria's can commit atrocities with little fear of prosecution or intervention due to a Russian veto. The emphasis on multilateralism actually plays to China's strength—it can block criticism and shift the emphasis of human rights activity through its United Nations veto, membership in the U.N. Human Rights Council, and influence with governments worldwide.²⁷ During the Cold War, by contrast, the movement was led by the spirited action of a large number of activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain, yielding a popular movement with a simple message that could resonate far and wide.

While the existing Western outlook and approach could be sustained in a unipolar world—which existed in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War—it is unsustainable in today's multipolar world, in which the greatest challenge to freedom emanates from authoritarian, geopolitical rivals. The rise of China as a competing model and the weakening of U.S.—and Western—influence around the world reduces the effective reach of any ideas (such as those not included in the main international human rights treaties) that are not morally binding across all the world's major philosophical and religious systems.²⁸ Countries that once accepted human rights ideas out of deference to Western accomplishment or power (e.g., Southeast Asia, Middle East, Africa) today can easily push back on them if the ideas do not have local roots—as Stephen Hopgood argues in *The Endtimes of Human Rights*.²⁹ (The United States' historical

inconsistency in promoting rights—by, for example, supporting authoritarian regimes that backed its side in the Cold War—does not help.) The great cultural differences that exist between the West and China—a contrast to the situation during the Cold War when East and West were both centered on Europe and its common heritage—makes this challenge even greater. Rights claims must be based on principles that are indisputable across cultures if they are to have the moral force necessary to be effective—as was the case in the Declaration. This moral force is what will arouse people everywhere—especially within China—to act.

Reclaiming Core Human Rights

Only by concentrating on the protection of a few practical rights—the core rights in the UDHR—can human rights again be the rallying cry that unites people and countries into a coalition against an authoritarian powerhouse while working to eat away at that state’s legitimacy from within. This return to basics approach—aiming first and foremost at eliminating the “great evils of the human condition”³⁰—would have relatively little difficulty gaining support from a wide set of people who normally are far apart in their philosophical and cultural outlook. It would not end debates over rights—these are inevitable—but would make attacks on them far easier to fend off, strengthening the legitimacy of the whole human rights project in the process. Other rights would still matter, but they would receive less priority and countries would be given more flexibility on how they achieved them.

This focused approach would hit China where it is most vulnerable. Whereas there are legitimate disagreements on how important many rights are, including whether democracy is necessary to uphold basic rights and develop economically, there are few people around the world—including in China—who would not support the core rights that millions of Chinese citizens are currently denied. Moreover,

it is hard to argue that eliminating discrimination based on ethnicity or religion, safeguarding religious freedom, and offering due process and fair trials to dissidents (who are mostly seeking only to improve the rule of law in the country, not overturn its power hierarchy) would actually hurt the country’s economic prospects. In fact, it could be argued that a stronger rule of law and a more inclusive polity would enhance its human—and thus economic—potential.

The State Department’s Commission on Unalienable Rights reached similar conclusions. Although it sought to ground American human rights policy in both “our nation’s founding principles and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and thus placed a greater emphasis on civil liberties and the right to pursue the fruit of one’s labor,³¹ the Commission’s final report also emphasized the importance of both maintaining a global consensus on core human rights and accommodating diversity in cross-cultural implementation. The “interplay between universal principles of human rights and the variety of human realities in which they must be honored is at the heart of the challenge of making human rights effective,” it says.³² Similarly, the report emphasizes the importance of the UDHR both as a rights framework and as an example of how an international consensus around rights can be built. The goal was to be a political and moral document, “not as a legal instrument creating formal law.”³³

The report (like the UDHR) goes on to make a sharp distinction between unalienable and positive rights.³⁴ Whereas unalienable rights are universal and pre-political, positive rights depend on context: They are the product of custom, tradition, and civil society established through politics, and may change over time. The commission makes clear that both are important and can be closely linked but that their roles are different. For example, even though there is no global consensus on elderly rights,

Singapore has mandated since 1995 that anyone over 60 years old is entitled to financial support from their children if they need it.³⁵ The core rights in the UDHR are unalienable—with universal support—while many of the rights promoted today are positive, and thus dependent more on context.

The Biden Administration: Tools and Possibilities

Ideally, the Biden administration would take this report to heart, make it a centerpiece of its human rights strategy worldwide, and use it in the ideological confrontation with China and other geopolitical threats. But new Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said he would “repudiate” the report during his confirmation hearings,³⁶ calling into question whether the new administration will learn the lessons of recent decades. Nevertheless, given its longstanding prominence in United States foreign policy (and the new administration’s early statements on, among other things, Myanmar and Hong Kong), it is likely that human rights will play a prominent role. What strategy should it adopt vis-à-vis China?

A Helsinki duplicate won’t work in Asia because China would never sign a similar agreement, and many of the countries whose support the United States needs—such as Vietnam and Thailand—would be at best ambivalent about doing so. In addition, the region lacks the multilateral frameworks—NATO, the Warsaw Pact, the European Economic Community, and COMECON—that formed the building blocks for a regional accord.

Trade-related possibilities remain: a restoration of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which once applied to China, could link trade privileges to a small number of core rights, as was done during the Cold War vis-à-vis the USSR. Even though its application for China was annually waived starting in the late 1970s as relations between the two countries warmed and eventually ended when the country joined the World Trade Organization in

2002, the very process of renewal focused attention on China’s human rights record, often creating great controversy and threats in Congress to overturn the waiver, especially after the Tiananmen Square killings of 1989.

Restoring the amendment (or legislating something similar) and ensuring it focused only on the few primary rights from the UDHR—all easily translatable across the world—would significantly alter the landscape. By penalizing China’s exports—through a tariff based on an annual highly independent, not easily-politicized, public assessment of its human rights record in the few specified areas—it would both generate global publicity of the abuses and force Chinese exporters (on whose lives tens of millions of people depend) to come to grips with the CCP’s poor behavior. This would create internal and external pressure for at least some alteration of the government’s course, opening the door for further change in time—as happened with Helsinki. If the Biden administration could convince American allies in Europe, Australia, Japan, India, and elsewhere to line up with the United States and pass parallel legislation (possibly tied to the same assessments), then the effect would be that much greater.

Public Opinion and Grassroots Advocacy

What are the chances this will occur? Given the inclination of most American (and Western) governments towards conciliation rather than conflict—as was often the case vis-à-vis the Soviet Union—not very likely. As such, a more bottom-up approach that electrifies public opinion in support of core rights at home and abroad—as in the Cold War—may be necessary to shift public policy in this direction. David Satter writes, “the dissident movement acted to push Western societies, sometimes unwillingly, toward attention to first principles. The dissident movement had a profound impact on Western public opinion.” Helped by outsized coverage in the media, their



No Muslim Ban 2, Washington, DC USA 00521. (Ted Eytan, February 4, 2017)

work made it “undeniable that the element holding the system together was fear.” The effect was to “establish a source of truthful information independent of, and in some cases competing for attention in the West with, the disinformation apparatus of the Soviet state.”

The impact on public opinion forced change in the policies of governments. Many working in official positions “would have preferred to deal with the Soviet Union ‘pragmatically,’ concentrating on what they imagined to be ‘mutual interests.’” But the change in public opinion “made such policies politically impossible.” The result was an “ideological counteroffensive directed against the moral vulnerability of the Soviet Union,” and a stronger stance on the part of Western governments to tie measures advantageous to the country—such as trade—to basic human rights.³⁷ Despite the violations to core rights exposed by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and other social movements in recent years, the United

States and its Western allies still hold a predominant position on their protection—and the more our human rights agenda focuses on these, the easier it will be to “convey what is ultimately at issue in our contest” with China. In fact, the rise of BLM is a testament to America’s basic freedoms and ability to withstand criticism when it falls short in safeguarding them—a great contrast to what is possible in China and other authoritarian regimes.

The American Soviet Jewry Movement, mentioned above, was the best example of this approach during the Cold War. Spurred by two small grassroots groups—one based in Cleveland that ultimately joined up with newer groups all over the country, the other based in New York City and geared towards students—and working far outside the American Jewish establishment, a relatively small number of activists spurred the development of a national movement. The movement catalyzed establishment actors to address the issue more

forcefully, leading to the founding of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, and shifted government policy when it fully supported the Jackson-Vanik amendment—the strongest exercise of political power in the history of the community.³⁸

The movement kept a bright spotlight on human rights abuses by vigorously campaigning for specific Soviet Jewish refuseniks (those who had sought to leave the country but were refused), making Anatoly Shcharansky, the most famous refusenik, a household name in the United States by the end of the 1970s. It established a slew of initiatives to draw attention to the hardships these Jews suffered—the wearing of bracelets inscribed with names of refuseniks, the twinning of young children with their counterparts who had fewer freedoms, writing campaigns, mass rallies, protests, lobbying, and even traveling to the Soviet Union to meet and support refuseniks directly. As Elliot Abrams writes, “In the 1970s and 80s it seemed as if every synagogue in America had a huge poster outside of it demanding freedom for Soviet Jewry.”³⁹

Christian or Muslim groups—those most egregiously treated in China today—could catalyze a similar movement today. If the movement could also win allies in Muslim and Christian countries worldwide (roughly half the world’s population is affiliated with these two faiths), then its impact would be multiplied, with a greater chance of a dramatic geopolitical turn towards the restored vision of human rights and broad, sustained pressure on the Chinese government. All of this would strengthen regime opponents domestically and create growing pressure on the regime to at least partially reform, a crack that could lead to greater changes over time.

The rising influence of China, Russia, and other authoritarian regimes marks the first time since the 1970s that liberal democracy is challenged globally by an alternative political framework.⁴⁰ It is essential that the United States launches a human rights

counteroffensive, as the Commission on Unalienable Rights sought. But given the confusion on human rights today, this likely depends on the development of a grassroots movement to pressure the CCP and give American leaders and their allies the political will to pursue and uphold a targeted approach. Only by making clear to people everywhere, at home and abroad, just what the difference is between the United States and these regimes—a difference that is too easily lost in the way human rights are promoted today—can ideas once again become part of the American arsenal.

The focus on core rights should be seen as just one element in a broader recalibration of U.S. policies intended to better confront the challenges posed by these states, and designed to build a broad coalition incorporating countries from across the world. Given the economic interdependencies, this will inevitably mean sacrificing some interests in the short term and overcoming resistance from those who most benefit from the status quo (such as firms sourcing goods in China). But challenging Beijing should be seen as in our greater national interest—essential to ensuring that China never gains a geopolitical position that could threaten our own security and, in turn, our liberties. The strength of human rights ideas undermined the legitimacy of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, and that strength can be summoned again. **PRISM**

Notes

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¹¹ Snyder, "Human Rights and the Cold War," 241.

¹² Jimmy Carter, "Presidential Inaugural Address," delivered January 20, 1977, <https://jimmycarter.info/presidential-inaugural-address-of-jimmy-carter/>.

¹³ Snyder, "Human Rights and the Cold War," 243.

¹⁴ Tamar Jacoby, "The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights," *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 5 (1986): 1066–1086, 1072.

¹⁵ President Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to Soviet Dissidents at Spaso House in Moscow," May 30, 1988, https://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/archive/files/reagan-speech-5-30-88_81685301b8.pdf.

¹⁶ Snyder, "Human Rights and the Cold War," 245.

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