

Handout F: Human rights and economic power

China has enjoyed high levels of economic growth and international trade, despite international criticism about human rights abuses. The main issue for Western countries in pursuing closer ties with China is to what extent are they willing to overlook widespread abuses of human rights in China for greater economic benefits for our own nation? If Canada and the EU publically call on China to respect basic human rights and stop torturing its citizens, provide greater freedoms to its citizens, etc., what sway does it actually have with Chinese authorities if these countries continue ‘business as usual’ and carry on economic cooperation and trade with China? Should other governments try to influence the status of human rights in China or is this an issue of internal sovereignty? Let’s look at the approaches of the Canadian government and the EU in the past couple years to see how two different entities attempted to answer these questions.

Canadian approach to China:

Canada was the second Western country to formalize relations with Communist China, with the establishment of diplomatic relations under Prime Minister Trudeau in 1970. In the 1990s, Canada strengthened political and business ties with China, leading Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to call Canada ‘China’s best friend.’ Increasing trade and economic partnership were the goals of Canadian missions to China, with Chinese human rights issues left for NGOs and other organizations to pursue, not the Canadian government.

In the mid-2000s, Chinese-Canadian relations deteriorated when the Conservative government came to power in Ottawa. Canada started to heavily criticize China’s human rights record, gave honorary Canadian citizenship to the Dali Lama, and accused China of industrial espionage in Canada. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper adopted a policy of ‘cool politics, warm economics,’ whereby Canada tried to increase Canada-China trade interaction but at the same time promote change from within China through suspending political dialogues with China, criticizing Chinese human rights policy, supporting greater autonomy for Tibet, and re-engaging with Taiwan. This policy was seen by many as a failure. By late 2007 Canada was one of the only Western countries to be actively criticizing China, and Canada-China trade had begun to substantially decline. The Chinese government signaled that it was getting tired of the Canadian approach and was going to lessen trade ties even further. Canada began to re-engage with China at this point, restarting dialogues between the two countries, softening its tone concerning human rights abuses in China, and promoting trade and investment between the two countries.

Finding a balance between economic cooperation and promotion of human rights remains a challenge for Canada. The government was heavily criticized for its politicized and human rights-oriented relations with China in the mid-2000s, but is also now criticized for ignoring human rights concerns in its economic dealings with China, which include the possibility of a Canada-China Free Trade Agreement. Some have suggested that because they are economically equal or greater than China, the U.S. and especially

the EU need to lead by example on how to maintain and ‘economically viable but firm on human rights’ relationship with China.

EU approach to China:

EU-China relations were established in 1985 with the signing of the EU-China Strategic Partnership, focused on trade, security, and foreign affairs. However, in 1989 as a response to the Tiananmen Square crackdown by Chinese authorities, the EU cut relations with China, applied sanctions, and heavily criticized the massacre of students by the government. Since then, the EU has taken a very different approach in its relationship with China. It reinstated relations in 1995, stressing the need for dialogue and international cooperation. Adding to the difficulties of EU-China relations is the fact that each member state has their own relations with China, in addition to contributing to EU-China relations. For example, if a major German company was beginning to get involved with China, Germany may be less inclined to issue harsh statements against China’s treatment of political prisoners, for fear of Chinese state retaliation against that company, or other German companies in China. This also impacts the ability and will of the EU as a whole to act as one coherent group in regards to China.

The EU-China Human Rights Dialogue was established in 1995 as a bi-annual meeting between EU and Chinese diplomats which the EU claims allows it to voice human rights concerns in China, on issues such as the death penalty, torture, and civil and political freedoms, ‘in a forum where China is committed to responding.’ The Dialogue has seen some successes, such as China’s signing of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the signing and ratifying of the UN Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, but not much more. The EU has shied away from confrontation with China on human rights and has indicated that *human rights are important in a relationship with China, but should not undermine the overall direction of EU-China relations*. The EU’s reliance on China as a trading partner has progressively lessened the initial fervor of its approach to promoting human rights in China, as strong and overt attempts by the EU to promote democracy and human rights in China were met by a ‘cooling’ of relations, meaning fewer trade deals, suspension of cooperation in various economic and political areas, etc.

There is strong disagreement between the European Union and human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and even the European Parliament on the effectiveness of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue and the EU’s approach to China in general. These NGOs heavily criticize the Dialogue for failing to produce any tangible change in Chinese behavior and claim that China simply uses the Dialogue as ‘smokescreen proof’ of its cooperation on human rights with the EU, despite a lack of real results. They also claim that the EU places the economic benefits of engaging with China (increased trade and investment, for example) above trying to change the human rights situation in China.

However, the impact that the EU can have on human rights within China is limited, as China is a sovereign state and can ultimately make its own decisions about what occurs within its borders. International pressure only goes so far, as any substantial change in torture, the death penalty, and civil and political freedoms in China would have to be initiated from within China, whether amongst the elite of the Communist Party, or

widespread and grassroots movements amongst the people of China itself. Much like the Canadian case, the EU is having a hard time persuading China to adopt Western standards of human rights while keeping economic cooperation high. Because the EU is a union of 28 member states, this creates additional complexities in trying to create a policy towards China, as there are potentially 28 voices, each with their own areas of interest and concern regarding China, and informing the EU's human rights policy with China.

Questions:

1. If you were the Canadian prime minister, how would you approach relations with China? Explain your reasoning.
2. To what extent should economics dictate how a country interacts with another? Should human rights play more of a role in countries' relationships with China?
3. Should the EU and Canada try to influence human rights within China? Can this be done? If so, how?

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