



## No Exceptions for Democracy in China

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President Bush's speech at last week's 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy made democracy a top foreign policy priority. The president reminded us of the hope our freedom inspires in others and the obligations it imposes on us: "In prison camps, in banned union meetings, in clandestine churches, men and women knew of at least one place -- a bright and hopeful land -- where freedom was valued and secured. And they prayed that America would not forget them."

But with regard to China, the largest dictatorship on Earth and a regime that jails democracy and labor activists, religious believers, journalists and health researchers, the president struck a different note. Only "eventually," he said, will the Chinese people "want their liberty pure and whole." Only "eventually" will they "insist on controlling their lives and their own country." Ironically, the president

then rejected the "cultural condescension" that has "questioned whether this country, or that people, or this group, are 'ready' for democracy."

And so the "China exception" to the Bush administration's democracy agenda was born. In case anyone thinks this unintentional, the day before, at a conference at Texas A&M University, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell left no doubt that the administration subordinates democracy in China to other interests. Instead, Powell advanced "real friendship" as the basis for U.S.-China relations and elevated it to the level of statecraft.

China, according to Powell, acts "in cooperation with us, not in competition with us." Gone is the "strategic competitor" language of the George W. Bush presidential campaign. China's "backsliding" on human rights is a "disappointment," Powell said, but it will be dealt with

"candidly, and openly, and sometimes in a critical way." After all, "that is how real friends deal with each other. That is how real partners get along."

Real friends, it seems, gloss over "China's sobering experience with SARS," which "stands as a lesson to all countries on the challenge of infectious diseases." Of course, it was China's deceit about severe acute respiratory syndrome that allowed it to spread inside China and to other countries. Moreover, HIV-AIDS, said the secretary, is a global threat "and yes, it is a danger to China as well." In fact, China's is the "worst medically caused HIV-AIDS epidemic in the world," says one expert who projects a death toll in the millions. Yet the secretary had not a word for the researchers who have gone to jail for investigating the disease's spread.

While there may be "ups and downs" in the friendship, there is "an even greater need to shape a relationship defined by our mutual interests, not by those areas of disagreement," Powell said. What's important is what Washington and Beijing do together, no matter what else is going on. In this view, the fact that the Tiananmen Square massacre "stalled" creation of a "new foundation of trust" between the United States and China rivals the crushing of a nascent democracy movement in importance.

In Powell's view, it was fortuitous that a Chinese fighter pilot "collided" with an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane. "Our teams worked with the Chinese teams over an intensive two-week period to resolve the matter," which, however "tragic" and "disappointing to us both," was actually an opportunity to create better relations.

One improvement, according to Powell, has been the frequency of contacts with Chinese officials. Powell joked that the Chinese foreign minister "tracked me down" at 6 in the morning after Powell shook hands in Panama with the president of Taiwan. Powell gave reassurances that there is "no other agenda but our single policy, our 'one China' [policy], which is clear-cut [and] principled." Of course, it is neither. American policy denies democratic Taiwan recognition, keeping it isolated and vulnerable while China builds up capabilities to achieve unification through force or coercion. Even this, according to the secretary of state, is important not because Taiwan's democracy is threatened but because it will "tell us a great deal about the kind of role China seeks with its neighbors and with us."

Perhaps the Bush administration believes that other interests are served by subordinating democracy to concerns such as cooperation on Iraq, terrorism and North Korea. But that cooperation is usually exaggerated, and in fact China serves its own interests in every case. A real friend would give sanctuary to North Korean refugees and use economic leverage to pressure Pyongyang, the most repressive regime in existence. Let's see how cooperative China is in creating a unified and democratic Korean Peninsula.

Where China's interests diverge from those of the United States, so will its actions. "Real friendship" cannot mask the incompatibility of a democratic government and a dictatorship. Isn't that what the president's speech to the National Endowment for Democracy was all about?



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