

Rebalance to Asia – Democracy, Good Governance and Human Rights

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, it's an honor to testify before you and a pleasure to return to the Foreign Relations Committee where I served as a staffer for Chairman Helms and Senator Thomas in the late 1990's.

Mr. Chairman, you convened this hearing to address the democracy, good governance and human rights elements of the "rebalance to Asia," a policy President Obama launched in late 2011. That policy has come in for criticism from military experts who believe it is not adequately resourced. As for democracy and human rights, it remains to be seen whether the administration's stated commitment to values as the "heart" of the rebalance will be fulfilled.

Rhetorically, the administration has laid out a strong case for the importance of values to the rebalance. When President Obama spoke to the Australian Parliament in 2011 he linked the policy to Asia's most dramatic struggles for freedom and to the pursuit of "free societies, free governments, free economies, [and] free people."

However, as the president begins his second term, his record of support for democracy and human rights is mixed at best. His weak response to the Iranian elections and the Green movement, failure to challenge the rise of authoritarianism in Russia and Venezuela and lack of leadership in supporting democrats in Arab Spring countries are all worrisome signs that the president may not follow through on his own words when it comes to Asia.

The administration can of course point to Burma as an exciting development under its watch. Aung San Suu Kyi, released from many years under house arrest led her National League for Democracy party in by-elections, sweeping almost all the available seats. Significant easing of repression has occurred under Burma's president, the former general Thein Sein. However, much remains to be done and much remains opaque. At times Thein Sein has seemed not to control the military – or if he does, he has been unwilling to rein in those forces as they wage war in Kachin.

Indeed, there is reason for concern about the haste with which the Obama administration is lifting sanctions and pursuing ties with Burma's unreformed military even before Burma has

held nationwide elections or changed the constitution to diminish the role of the military and allow Aung San Suu Kyi to be a candidate for president.

Nevertheless, the lesson of Burma must be that a policy that placed support for democracy over purely strategic interests can succeed. In Burma, the United States supported a democratic movement for 25 years, applied sanctions and political leverage and persevered even when other countries followed other paths. That was the right thing to do, and the Burmese people know it. Burma's people "want very much to be associated with the United States," the journalist and former political prisoner Maung Wuntha told me in August 2012. "They believe that the ability to resist China depends on strong relationships with the United States and Europe."

Of course, the rebalance is inspired by China, whether the administration says so explicitly or not. The administration simply cannot advance the rebalance's democracy component without a better human rights stance toward China, because the challenge China presents is not simply its growth in economic and military power but also its example as an alternative political system. Even as the administration cites continuing deterioration in China's human rights situation, it insists that abuses are best addressed in private with Chinese officials, or sometimes obliquely, as Secretary Clinton did in Mongolia last summer.

In keeping with an "engagement" policy that has prevailed since the adoption of PNTR for China, there is no serious threat of consequences for abuses. Washington's human rights dialogues with Beijing are the embodiment of "de-linkage." At last year's dialogue, the administration explicitly rejected the idea that the dialogue is a forum for obtaining releases of political prisoners or for negotiating systemic change. More generally, the U.S. undermines its stated commitment to human rights by carrying on business as usual and failing to integrate these vital topics into the centerpiece of U.S.-China relations, the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

To build on the progress in Burma, the U.S. must shape the political environment in Asia. Both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy are necessary. This administration is joining the region's existing institutions. President Obama participates in the East Asia Summit, for example. However, once inside organizations with broad agendas and no political criteria for membership, the U.S. frequently runs up against Chinese influence that may run counter to those of America and its allies.

If the administration is serious about pursuing democratic values and objectives as part of the rebalance, some new thinking is in order. A forum for Asian/Pacific democracies would be useful. While many Asian countries are pleased to see the U.S. participating in fora with China, those fora are often inhospitable to an agenda based on democratic values. "Chinese

multilateralism,” Gary J. Schmitt has written “is not driven by some new commitment to liberal internationalism, but by old-fashioned *realpolitik* and China’s desire to stem interference in its own domestic rule.”

Greater coordination among the region’s democracies would enable effective responses to crises or other events and could also prevent the backsliding that occurs without such bulwarks in place. A forum of Asian democracies might consider: preparations for the 2015 Burma elections and the 2017 date for a change in the way Hong Kong’s chief executive is chosen. Tibet is another issue that would benefit from coordinated action among the democracies. The U.S. and its allies must consider the momentous changes that have taken place in the Tibetan leadership, that is, the Dalai Lama’s handover of political power to an elected leader of the exile government and the Dalai Lama’s plans for his succession.

Asia is undergoing a wave of leadership transitions. Presidents Shinzo Abe and Park Geung Hye have just taken office in Japan and South Korea respectively. Indonesia is having an election next year. Now is a good time to consider greater coordination among the region’s democracies. Although China would certainly object to such a group, the alternative will be to struggle with China’s growing assertiveness in the organizations it dominates.

Democracy has made strong gains in Asia over the past few decades. The U.S. should build on that foundation with an institutional, multilateral framework that would help sustain and make permanent this progress and the peace and prosperity that comes with it. That would be a great outcome of the rebalance policy and an excellent legacy for President Obama.