

Liu Xiaobo and Dutch's Optimism

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Dr. Bruce Gilley
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Mark O. Hatfield School of Government
Portland State University



Honored Committee Members,

I am grateful to have the opportunity to address the committee this morning on the important and inspiring award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to China's Liu Xiaobo. The perspective I would like to offer is simple and can be stated as follows: Liu Xiaobo's award is important because it is a reminder to us in the free world, the West, and the United States that even though we are entering a period of intense rivalry and possibly conflict with a rising China, the smiling forces of modernization and liberalization are at work in that country. This means that in the coming decades, even as we manage and challenge potentially disruptive behavior by China's rulers, its people continue to march towards a democratic society.

I do not believe that the Nobel prize will have any measurable effect on political reform in China, any more than the award of the same prize to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1989 had any effect on Chinese rule in Tibet. But I do believe it will serve as an important beacon to policy-makers outside of China, reminding them to engage and target, and to retain faith in, Liu Xiaobo's China. The temptation to believe that we are engaged in a life-or-death struggle with a hostile new Oriental juggernaut will be strong in the coming decades. We should instead use Liu Xiaobo's award to think more

carefully about what is going on in China, which I will address briefly here, and to retain a certain Reaganesque optimism about the potential for human freedom everywhere. We should respond to a rising China the same way that Liu Xiaobo responded to his state security captors before he was sent to jail: we have no enemies, only acquaintances who are still trapped in yesterday's modes of thought and action, acquaintances whom we hope and believe fervently will someday become our friends.

Honored committee members, the year is 1975. Russia's GDP per capita in that year is about the same as China's today. Andrei Sakharov has just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and in a few years will be put under house arrest in Gorky. Global geo-political rivalries are intensifying. The international politics of the Soviet Union is entering its most difficult period – we have the invasion of Afghanistan, proxy wars in Africa and Latin America, arms races, martial law in Poland, KAL 007, and Chernobyl yet to come. Earlier claims that the Soviet Union is modernizing and liberalizing because of the post-totalitarian reforms ushered in by Khrushchev are now scoffed at. Smart people, like Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, are saying that the chances for democratic change in the Soviet Union are “virtually nil”.

Looking back, we see that we missed something fundamental. By focusing on SALT talks, or by dismissing Sakharov as a vain hope of the West, we did not see how this great authoritarian creation was entering its last decades. The message of Sakharov's prize, in retrospect, was that we should have been better Marxists, trusting that the ineluctable forces of modernization would bring political change, although not the sort Marx imagined. Instead, we were Hobbesians, believing we needed to prepare home defense in the face of a Spanish Armada, an increasingly cold and competitive world of enemies and invaders. Had we been more ready to respond to the good luck of history, some, but not all of the democratic regress that subsequently occurred in Russia, might have been avoided.

China is in the same position today. Externally, whether in its assertive claims in the South China and East China Seas, its attempts to use coercive economic diplomacy, or its domestic silencing of dissent, we see another juggernaut. Yet this is not a juggernaut. This is a juggler. Behind the assertiveness and rhetoric is a country struggling mightily with the implications of development – social, environmental, financial, economic, cultural, and, political. It is easy to get carried away in the Orientalist imagery of Moors or Mongols challenging the West. But China represents no fundamental challenge to the West. It's contributions to key global issues like terrorism, the environmental, financial restructuring, global health, disaster relief, peacebuilding, and weapons proliferation are marginal. The West retains its indispensability and will continue to do so as long as it continues to represent the basic humanistic impulse better than any other part of the world. Internally, while the CCP continues to suppress dissent and control information, it does so against the backdrop of an increasingly outspoken and informed citizenry.

The CCP leadership, which is entering a delicate transition in 2012, is deeply divided on the question of political reform. There are two visions of political reform competing within the leadership today. One, associated with premier Wen Jiabao and earlier with his mentor Zhao Ziyang, purged in 1989, is what we might call the *grassroots democracy* vision. This vision imagines a China with an increasingly vigorous electoral and civil society-based democracy at the local level up to and including provinces. This vision is all about bottom-up accountability. It is often consciously modeled on the Taiwan experience, and includes a leading role for the CCP at the national level for some transitional period. Wen has championed the expansion of direct elections to the township level. It is the approach likely to be favored by incoming party general secretary Xi Jinping, who experienced and supported the lively civil society and local politics in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces during his periods there.

The second vision is what we might call the *party democracy* view, which is promoted by party general secretary Hu Jintao. It is about top-down accountability. Ironically, this is the approach that was adopted by Gorbachev. The focus here is on fighting corruption within the party, increasing internal debates and even elections within the party, and using party mandates to strengthen the accountability of local governments. In the new leadership of 2012, this vision will be represented by premier Li Keqiang.

What is important about this debate is that it reminds us of the party's race against time to maintain its legitimacy. We often assume that the regime's legitimacy comes from economic growth and nationalism alone. It does not. It also comes from the steady expansion of social and economic freedoms as well as real improvements in governance that have been seen in the last 20 years. The amount of energy and creativity being poured into both the *grassroots democracy* and the *party democracy* visions of political reform tell us that China's leaders – if not China's foreign admirers – think that political reform matters to their future. And to be sure, this same authoritarian adaptability has succeeded in delivering improvements in rights and governance that have satisfied most Chinese for the past 20 years.

The mistake is to think that the party can satiate the thirst for freedom forever with, for instance, fewer limits on internal migration or more efficient passport processing bureaucracies. There is still probably several more years in which such performance will work to maintain legitimacy. But experience elsewhere tells us that social demands for democracy will eventually delegitimize the current regime – and then it is a question of how long the regime decides to cling to power or how quickly it undertakes preemptive moves towards real democracy.

This is where Liu Xiaobo comes in. Liu represents a third vision of political reform, one of *liberal democracy*. Emerging from the 1989 Tiananmen movement, and tracing its origins back to the late 19th century and early republican thinkers of China,

this vision seeks a deliberate transition to a liberal democratic political system, in today's situation through a gradual implementation of existing PRC constitutional provisions, minus the CCP's messianic leading role. Liu is a reminder of this stirring outcome that plausibly awaits China at the end of this long race – namely a thoughtful, tolerant, inventive, and liberal social and political system, infused with the richness and wisdom of Chinese civilization. That outcome seems impossible to imagine at present – just as it was of the Soviet Union of 1975. Yet it is more likely to occur and (unlike Russia) to endure because, unlike the Soviet Union, China has already completed its transition to a market economy and it will not face a humiliating loss of its world power. Political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel conclude in their 2005 book on *The Human Development Sequence*, using extensive cross-national data on value transformation and democratization, that “China will make a transition to a liberal democracy within the next two decades.” As Moshe Lewin presciently saw in his 1988 book *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* about Russian society and the CPSU, Chinese society will slowly outgrow the CCP.

Liu Xiaobo helps us to focus on this China, and not to imagine that the insecure and increasingly aggressive external China is the one of the future. He is a reminder that the reason we should not confront or contain China is not some relativistic argument that the Chinese are different or prefer tyranny to democracy, nor that we need to reach some realistic accommodation with this titan of the East. Instead, we need to respond thoughtfully to the China of the current regime because we have faith that its days are numbered.

Reagan, who came into office as a Cold Warrior extraordinaire, instinctively realized this about the Soviet Union and changed tack in his second term. Liu Xiaobo reminds us of the need to retain Dutch's infectious optimism about the fate of communist regimes, especially rapidly modernizing ones. He reminds us of the need to have confidence in the universal values of elections, the rule of law, pluralism, and

human rights that are today so widely discussed in China. Who truly could imagine, just a few years ago, that the outgoing chairman of key state enterprise would choose to use his valedictory address to urge China's young people to reject the so-called "China Model" of authoritarian development and instead embrace "universal values" with democracy at their core, as retiring China Merchants Group chairman Qin Xiao did at Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management this past summer? For China's communist regime, the Cold War never ended and it never will. Our role is to avoid that same mistake, to realize that the Cold War is in fact over and that China's regime is being swept along by the forces of modernization like dozens before it.

Recently, a Zhejiang University professor named Liu Guozhu, who is a senior fellow of that institution's Center for Civil Society and of the China Foundation for Human Rights, wrote an essay on the National Endowment for Democracy. The essay attacked the NED as a relic of the Cold War. It was quickly reprinted in party and Maoist websites and periodicals in China. After making some inquiries, I learned that Dr. Liu had originally written quite a different article, one with a largely positive view of the NED and its role in promoting democracy in Latin America, Africa, and East Asia. It was based on research that he conducted while visiting at San Diego State University in 2007 and 2008. But no official publication would run the original article. Only after party editors rewrote the article in a critical tone was it published. This is a microcosm of contemporary China – the exterior face can seem oppositional, bellicose, and deeply illiberal. It is easy to see much evidence of hostile intent and behavior. But the interior mind is swirling, changing, seeking acceptance, and humanistic.

Liu Xiaobo matters because he appeals to our better instincts in dealing with China. To celebrate positive change, to defend individuals and rights supporters, and to have confidence in the universality of freedom and democracy and their triumph everywhere is his challenge to us. "I have no enemies", his words, should be ours too.

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