

Preserving Liberal Society and Promoting Human Rights



“We have consistently spoken out against China’s repression of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang province – and we will continue to do so. [...] We acted quickly and willingly – with cross-party support at home – to keep faith with the people of Hong Kong.”⁴⁷

Boris Johnson, UK Prime Minister, MSC Special Edition, February 19, 2021

The Stakes

In the decades after World War II, many in the West believed that economic integration would lead to shared values, prosperity, and peace. The end of the Cold War seemed to validate this belief. The emergence of China as an authoritarian state and global economic power has challenged this proposition. Beijing has flouted the norms and values of the rules-based order and asserted that China’s development model provides an alternative to that of market democracies. It has weaponized interdependence and become increasingly assertive, violating other countries’ sovereignty.

China’s assault on human rights and democratic values and norms threatens the political and economic well-being and security of the transatlantic partners across several dimensions. First, it undermines foundational norms of the rules-based order, including freedom of navigation (through its military actions in the South China Sea) and free trade (via its system of subsidies, non-market barriers to entry, and cyber-economic espionage). Second, it works to limit free speech outside its borders through economic coercion. It has threatened and punished countries and multinationals for deviating from Beijing’s line on sovereignty, for example, or for calling for an investigation into the origins of Covid-19. Beijing is also a leading purveyor of disinformation. It sought to inflame political tensions during the recent Taiwan and US elections and to undermine trust in vaccines on both sides of the Atlantic. Third, through the BRI, China exports elements of its political model: it discounts transparency and civil society participation and actively promotes technologies and training that enhance state control over civil society. Fourth, China is using international organizations to align norms and values with its own: redefining what constitutes human rights, undermining the role of human rights defenders within the UN, and proposing new technical standards, including those that would strengthen state control over the internet. Fifth, inside its borders, the Chinese government has detained more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslims in labor and reeducation camps in Xinjiang, raising questions of genocide.⁴⁵ Similar efforts to eradicate indigenous religions and cultures are underway in Inner Mongolia and Tibet.⁴⁶ China’s imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong also suppresses the individual rights of Hong Kong citizens and reflects a com-

plete disregard for the rule of law. Finally, foreign actors living and working inside China live under the threat of arbitrary and wrongful detention without access to due process.

The transatlantic bond is rooted in first-order values such as democracy, pluralism, rule of law, due process, separation of powers, freedom of press, free and fair markets, and respect for human rights and civil liberties. It is critical for transatlantic democracies to uphold these values.



“There are areas where we need to challenge China directly, for example on human rights. So a firm united position such as the one we established here at the G7 will continue to show our approach based on shared values.”⁴⁸

Justin Trudeau, Canadian Prime Minister, G7 Summit, June 13, 2021

The State of Play

In the US, the Biden administration has made democratic values a centerpiece of its foreign policy and has pressed the EU for increased cooperation. In March 2021, the EU and US, along with the UK and Canada, simultaneously levied travel and financial sanctions against four Chinese officials with direct responsibility for China’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang. In addition, the US and EU, together with Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, released a joint statement calling for justice for the Uyghurs and others in Xinjiang. The US and several European countries have also suspended their extradition treaties with Hong Kong in response to China’s flagrant violations of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration. At the G7 Summit in June 2021, democratic leaders reiterated their pushback to Chinese practices in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.⁴⁹ Moreover, the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, a group of over 200 European, North American, Asian, and African parliamentarians and representatives from democratic countries, is producing reports and delivering coordinated messages on Chinese human rights issues.

These actions send an important signal to China concerning governments’ emphasis on the continued strength of democratic values as a binding element in the transatlantic alliance and of their determination to uphold the norms of the liberal international order. However, they remain largely ad hoc and not grounded in a joint strategy. Moreover, many EU member states remain reluctant to confront Beijing on democracy and human rights issues given concerns that doing so would jeopardize economic ties, as underscored by Hungary’s decision to block an EU statement criticizing Beijing for its crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong.⁵⁰ In addition, concerns about putting China’s cooperation on climate action at risk are often cited over reluctance to confront Beijing.

The Priorities

Transatlantic partners should focus on a few key priorities and establish a larger framework or coordinating mechanism over the next six to 18 months for advancing their shared values and norms:

Setting the terms of civil society interactions – starting with the Beijing Olympics

Transatlantic partners should increase coordination in order to deny China unjustified public diplomacy wins from international civil society events and interactions. With a view to the Beijing 2022 Olympics, this means developing, along with NGOs and multinationals, a strategy that prevents China from receiving positive publicity. This may include not sending government delegations, encouraging corporate sponsors not to celebrate China, and actively highlighting China's ongoing human rights abuses in the media.

Combatting digital authoritarianism

The EU and US should use the EU-US Trade and Technology Council and establish working groups with representatives from other developing and advanced economies to (1) establish shared digital governance principles and, where relevant, adopt unified or complementary technologies and standards related to personal data collection, network technologies, state surveillance, internet governance, and digital currency; (2) modernize and expand export control legislation to help ensure that US and European entities are not enabling human rights abuses; (3) further sanction Chinese businesses and entities that provide surveillance technology, training, or equipment to authoritarian regimes implicated in human rights abuses; (4) consider restrictions on US and European companies involved in building AI tools for repression; and (5) work with fragile democracies to strengthen the political and legal frameworks that govern how surveillance technologies are used and build the capacity of civil society and watchdog organizations to check government abuse.

Elevating anti-corruption as a national security priority

Transatlantic partners should create mechanisms for government officials in the US, Europe, and other democratic countries to discuss Chinese authoritarian influence within their countries and ways to effectively push

back, including against disinformation and “weaponized corruption”. This includes raising awareness of China’s influence tactics within private enterprise, the media, academia, and government, and coordinating efforts to bolster the capacity of civil society, political parties, and independent media to expose and counter such tactics.

Formalizing consultation in the OECD and with the Global South

A powerful facilitator for the abovementioned measures would be the transatlantic partners establishing formal frameworks for ongoing consultation – including (1) a working group structure within the OECD and (2) a consultation mechanism with democracies in the Global South. The working group within the OECD would study, consult, and coordinate complementary – if not common – policies to respond to Chinese values-related threats including digital authoritarianism, weaponized corruption, and economic coercion. A formal mechanism for engaging with democracies in the Global South is necessary because preservation of free and democratic values is not a prerogative of advanced market democracies. Others have powerful home-grown traditions of democracy and share many first-order ideals with North America and Europe. The consultation mechanism should help outline how to build inclusive alliances of the like-minded and, for instance, how to use reconfigured supply chains to bolster relations with such players.