

Opinion – America’s Questionable Commitment to ‘Freedom’

Written by Ashton Ng

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On March 12, 1947, President Harry Truman addressed Congress, requesting \$400 million to help Greece and Turkey suppress their communist uprisings. As President Truman articulated, America has a global mission ‘to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes.’ But this commitment to ‘help free peoples’ is often contradicted by actual American foreign policy. The Greek and Turkish governments then were themselves repressive and authoritarian. As American historian Eric Foner pointed out, President Truman ‘set a precedent for American assistance to anticommunist regimes throughout the world, no matter how undemocratic.’ More recently, on 6 June 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo published a statement echoing Truman’s narrative: ‘During the best of times, the PRC ruthlessly imposes communism. Amid the most difficult challenges, the United States secures freedom.’ But, the facts do not support such black-and-white descriptions of China and America.

In 2016 alone, America dropped at least 26,171 bombs on seven Muslim-majority countries. China has not bombed anybody since its invasion of Vietnam in 1979. As defense analyst Timothy R. Heath noted, China’s ‘military will soon have no personnel with firsthand combat experience.’ Secretary Pompeo’s press statement may become the ‘Truman Doctrine’ that begins the new Cold War of our time. Numerous commentators, such as *CNBC* analyst Weizhen Tan, opined that ‘A new ‘cold war’ is here and things could get uglier as other countries get dragged into the conflict.’

The battle lines are drawn. On June 5, 2020, senior politicians from eight democracies (America, Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, Germany, Norway, and Sweden) and the European Parliament formed the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC). The Alliance echoed the age-old commitment to freedom, identifying China as ‘authoritarian at home and ever more assertive abroad’ and thus a ‘global challenge’ to ‘the democratic norms which keep us free and safe’. On June 10, 2020, Japan announced its intention to lead the Group of Seven (G7) countries in drafting a statement opposing Hong Kong’s national security law, declaring that the G7 share ‘universal values such as freedom, democracy and rule of law.’

But America’s inclusion in the Alliance is deeply ironic, considering its actual foreign policies when compared to those of other IPAC members. America has repeatedly violated the United Nations Charter’s prohibition of the use of force against other states, carrying out targeted killings in Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen with impunity.

On June 11, 2020, the Trump administration even imposed economic sanctions and travel restrictions on the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose only ‘crime’ was to open an investigation into war crimes in Afghanistan conducted by all sides. As Stanford University law professor Beth Van Schaack pointed out, ‘When we’re trying to support accountability in Myanmar, and the ICC is looking at that situation and has asserted jurisdiction over that, how do we then turn around and sanction the very individuals who are doing what we praised in the past?’

Secretary Pompeo’s statement further criticized mainland China’s suppression of freedoms ‘in Hong Kong and Taiwan,’ directly contrasting this with America’s ‘robust commitment to the rule of law, transparency, and unalienable human rights.’

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But throughout Hong Kong’s 150-year history under British colonial rule, America has no track record of opposing the absence of democracy there. As Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew remarked in Hong Kong on December 14, 1992, ‘The British never governed these countries by one-man-one-vote policies. It was one British Governor, one British Resident and his word was law.’ It was only after Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997 that America expressed an abrupt and profound commitment to Hong Kong democracy. Given such a dramatic change of heart, it is unclear whether America is committed more towards freeing Hong Kong or containing China’s rise.

Indeed, even if China democratized and won over Hong Kong and Taiwan through granting full freedom and rights, that would still weaken America’s strategic position in Asia. Thus, America would still endeavor to contain China’s rise, as it did to democratic Japan in the 1980s when the Japanese led the world in technology and looked poised to displace America as the world’s largest economy.

Furthermore, after the Chinese Communists won the civil war in 1949, America abandoned Taiwan, expecting it to fall to the Communists. As the distinguished historian Warren I. Cohen articulated, ‘The United States would cease wasting its resources. Kuomintang China was dead.’ President Truman formally stated his ‘hands-off’ policy in January 1950: ‘The United States will not provide military aid or advice to Chinese forces on Formosa.’ The Nationalists in Taiwan felt ‘well and truly betrayed by the United States,’ noted the public policy professor Gary D. Rawnsley.

It was only after the Korean War (1950–1953) erupted when America, with its military already invested in East Asia, sharply reversed its position. America then backed Chiang Kai-shek’s military dictatorship on Taiwan for over two decades until Chiang’s death in 1975. In the Korean War itself, America supported South Korean dictator Syngman Rhee to fight the Chinese-backed North Korean communists. A two-year study commissioned by the South Korean government from 2006 to 2008 found that the U.S. authorized the Rhee regime’s massacre of at least 100,000 South Koreans in the summer of 1950, to prevent them from joining the north. The executions were sometimes done in the presence of American military officers. Starting with President Rhee, America continued supporting authoritarian South Korean governments until the 1980s.

Whether in the original Cold War, or in a new one we may be entering into between the US and China, America extols freedom but pursues supremacy. In the present, as in the past, it calls for totalitarian regimes to be brought to justice but omits itself from key international laws and norms. This paints a picture suggesting that America’s true commitment to the lofty goals of freedom is questionable at best.

About the author:

Dr Ashton Ng obtained his PhD in Chinese History at the University of Cambridge, where he is the 2019 Kuok Family–Lee Kuan Yew Scholar and a Cambridge Trust Scholar. Ashton graduated with Distinction from the University of Oxford with an MSt in Traditional China. Prior to this, he majored in Classical Chinese at Peking University on a full Chinese Government Scholarship, winning the Outstanding Graduate Award and all top undergraduate prizes. Ashton is also a Young NUS Fellow at the National University of Singapore and a Tan Kah Kee Postgraduate Scholar.