

CSCC Podcast Ep. 26: “U.S. Human Rights Policy Towards China – Amy Gadsden”

Introduction:

Welcome back to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode you’ll hear my conversation, on the topic of “U.S. Human Rights Policy Towards China”, with Amy Gadsden, the Associate Vice Provost for Global Initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania, and a leading expert on human rights in China, a topic she has approached from an impressive range of vantage points (including civil society, government, and higher education) over the past few decades.

Last week, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (the “CECC”)—a U.S. governmental body established in 2000 to monitor and encourage China’s compliance with international human rights standards—issued its 20th annual report, documenting (in its words) “human rights abuses committed by the Chinese government,” and putting forward recommendations for both congressional and executive branch action in response. The very existence of the CECC, born as a reaction to the granting of permanent Most Favored Nation trading status to China by the Clinton administration, helps to underscore the unique position of human rights considerations in the United States’ complex, multi-faceted relationship with China. Well before the current emphasis on the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, which also are foregrounded in this year’s CECC report, systematic attention to China’s human rights practices has been a consistent, relentless feature of U.S. policy toward China at least since 1989—albeit a non-exclusive one, whose relative importance has fluctuated over time.

In order to better understand this landscape—to gain a better sense of why human rights became such a major factor in U.S.-China relations, and how this portfolio of issues relates to other policy considerations—I was very happy to convince my friend and Penn colleague Amy Gadsden to make a rare encore appearance on this podcast. I know of no one else who brings the same range of analytical tools to these questions, rooted in Amy’s experience as China Director for the International Republican Institute in the 1990s; as a Special Advisor for China at the U.S. State Department in the 2000s; as a high-level administrator of international programs and initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania since 2009; and even in her doctoral studies on Qing legal history before all of that. True to form, Amy delivered (in the conversation you are about to hear) as comprehensive, erudite, and provocative a set of responses to my questions about U.S. human rights policy towards China as I possibly could have hoped for, and that you are likely to find anywhere.

We recorded our conversation back in August 2019, in a year of weighty anniversaries in China (including the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, and the 30th anniversary of the crackdown at Tiananmen Square), and a few months into the dramatic Hong Kong protests of 2019 (that would continue on for some months after that). At that time, Amy and I also well perceived that we were living through a particularly tumultuous period in U.S.-China relations, reflected on campus by the U.S. visa dilemmas facing Chinese students (an issue we referenced at both ends of our conversation, and which sadly remains about as relevant today). Little did we know, of course, how much *more* tumultuous the relationship was soon to become, not least on account of the COVID-19 pandemic that was just over the horizon, then, and the Ukraine crisis which dominates our attention now.

I offer that background context to help situate a few aspects of my conversation with Amy, but with confidence in its timeless appeal and particular usefulness today. Most of all, what you will hear us

discuss is the way in which human rights became such an enduring dimension of U.S. policy towards China, through the vagaries of different Democratic and Republican administrations since normalization of relations in the 1970s; and how the core question of the precise *significance* of this policy dimension (a question Amy and I debate at the end of our conversation) has come to be framed by particular choices which the Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, respectively, have made.

Of course, there was no Biden administration at the time when Amy and I spoke, and so we did not get a chance to work into our analysis President Biden's exhortation that human rights "must be at the center of our foreign policy, not the periphery," nor to judge the degree to which his administration has (or has not) managed to realize this call in its first year in office. But as I record this introduction today, I can at least call your attention to some remarks on this topic delivered by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the Council on Foreign Relations back in December. Asked where exactly "human rights falls in the Biden administration's agenda," Jake concluded a meditative answer by suggesting that, while one could argue that even the Biden administration had not "sufficiently taken human rights into account"—for example, in the narrowly tailored way it designed a "diplomatic boycott" of the Beijing Winter Olympics—one could *not* say "that human rights were not a real, live, legitimate factor at the decision-making table."

What precisely does that mean, or should it mean, especially as relates to U.S. policy towards China? For a deep, historically-rooted exploration of this important question, I cannot recommend highly enough, and am delighted to present to you now, my conversation with Dr. Amy Gadsden.