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The internationalisation of China's approach to human rights: implications for the EU

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  China's human rights record, alongside its one-party authoritarian governance system, has generated negative views of the country and its government, especially in the EU.
-  However, the human rights issue is less significant when assessing the views of people in the Global South, where there is an increasingly positive view of China, while views of the US are deteriorating.
-  There is a clash between the universalist, individual-based view of human rights promoted by Europe and China's relativist/collectivist approach.
-  Also significant is the distinction between the Western emphasis on civil-political rights and the economic-social rights promoted by China.
-  The Chinese approach appeals to large sections of the impoverished Global South because it prioritises collective economic development, while the Western focus on democracy and individual rights is seen as unproductive and hypocritical.
-  Generally, while the Chinese Communist Party's approach to human rights continues to affect public opinion in Europe, it is less significant than other issues for people in the Global South.
-  From the EU's perspective, weighing up whether to prioritise European values or economic pragmatism is perhaps an insoluble dilemma, but one that demands more consistent policymaking than has hitherto been the case.

Keywords

Human rights

*Universalism
versus
Relativism*

*Civil-political
versus Economic-
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Global South

*Chinese
Communist
Party (CCP)*

*Normative
diplomacy*



Introduction

The Chinese government's policies towards some of its citizens, most notably minorities such as Uyghurs and Tibetans, have long been controversial. In fact, they are the most important aspect of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as far as many Europeans are concerned. For a large number of people, the issue of "re-education camps" in Xinjiang and the suppression of individual freedoms in Hong Kong and Tibet are automatically a reason to censure and shun contact with China. Adding in other factors such as China's one-party Communist governance system and the Chinese assertion that the island of Taiwan is part of 'One China' leaves a sour taste in the mouths of many people in Western countries. Consequently, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is frequently viewed as having a blatant disregard for the rights of people in its own and other countries which cannot be ignored when considering China-related issues.

Yet the impact of the human rights issue on China's international image is far from clear-cut if one takes a global perspective rather than a Eurocentric or West-centric one. Across large parts of the Global South (i.e., economically less developed countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia), China's human rights record takes a back seat to other factors such as trade and investments. For instance, public opinion surveys show that many people in the Middle East – whom one might expect to be concerned about the fate of the Muslim Uighurs of Xinjiang – have been persuaded by their leaders to ignore such factors and prioritise instead the economic benefits of engagement with China. ^[1] In the context of underdevelopment and lack of economic resources, many nations are obviously going to be pragmatic and prioritise

economic growth over idealistic goals.. Under the umbrella of Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), they can attract loan-funded infrastructure projects and other investments from Chinese companies. [2] These are more attractive to national elites than listening to lectures from the EU about human rights and democracy. [3]

The point here is that the assumption – widely held in Europe – that everyone will automatically form an unfavourable view of the PRC's approach to human rights is misconceived when it comes to much of the Global South. Developing countries do not necessarily share the universalist European view of individual human rights and instead some of them (those that favour building better relations with China) are leaning towards the relativist/collectivist Chinese interpretation (of which more later in this paper). At the same time, as a previous EuroHub4Sino paper demonstrated, US support for Israel in Gaza is undermining its support base in Muslim countries, while Trump's cancellation of USAid programmes in Africa means that America is losing ground to China there. [4]

The point is that China is winning because of America's increasingly negative image during the second Trump administration, rather than because of anything new that China is doing. China's foreign policy consistency makes it look like a model of peace and stability in contrast with the wild fluctuations occurring during Trump 2.0. This is reflected in survey data. For instance, the Pew Research Center's Spring 2025 Global Attitudes Survey showed that the percentage of people worldwide with a favourable opinion of the U.S. fell from 51 to 35 per cent between 2024 and 2025, while China's favourability rose from 23 to 32 per cent in the same period. [5] In 2025, public opinion in Global South countries such as Indonesia, Mexico, Kenya, Turkey, South Africa and Nigeria turned towards China and away from the U.S. [6] Washington is busy handing the world to Beijing on a plate, meaning that China's human rights record is no longer so much of a drag on the Chinese government's global charm offensive.

Two sides of China's approach to human rights

The rest of this paper will examine the two main aspects of China's approach to human rights which have an impact on its international relations. The first is concerned with perceptions of human rights abuses within China, which tend to be the main focus of European observers. This means looking at the effects of Chinese government policy in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, as well as the general suppression of dissent through internet controls, the social credit system, and other means of top-down control. The top-down Chinese approach to human rights impacts countries where the rule of law is weak and democratic institutions are not in place because it serves as a model for autocratic governments.

The second aspect concerns China's arguably different conception of human rights to the one generally taken for granted in the West. Alongside Marxist precepts, the approach promoted by the CCP also emanates from Chinese political philosophy and cultural traditions and so is unfamiliar to people in the West. When the collective is prioritised over the individual, and when economic-social goals (such as healthcare, education, housing, and food security)

are prioritised over civil-political ones (such as freedom of speech, gender equality, and the right to vote), the result is an ideational and material context for understanding human rights which does not correspond to that adopted by the EU. Affluent countries tend to take economic-social rights for granted while prioritising the promotion of individual, civil-political rights. However, the collectivist-orientated, economic-social Chinese model for human rights development, explicitly promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), [7] has greater appeal in the less economically developed Global South. This impacts views of China, making the PRC more popular in the Global South where people are likely to overlook problems in the area of civil-political rights.

China's human rights record

According to European standards, the Chinese state does not conform to human rights norms – as Western European leaders, including the UK's Keir Starmer in January 2026, feel compelled to remind President Xi Jinping when they visit Beijing. [8] The CCP controls the political system, suppressing all serious opposition (while nominally allowing a few other parties which do not challenge its regime to exist). It controls flows of information through means such as the so-called 'Great Firewall', which is essentially a Western nickname for China's system of internet censorship. [9] It expects all its citizens to conform to the rules it dictates, particularly in the spheres of politics and religion, but also sometimes in other areas such as economics. Those who break the rules may be arrested, detained and possibly even tortured (the evidence on this tends to need further corroboration, but various stories have leaked out from Xinjiang 're-education camps' and other internment facilities) without recourse to legal process. [10] For lesser infringements, they may be given a bad social credit score and banned from travelling. Religious groups are tolerated but closely monitored and tightly controlled. Only five religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Daoism) are officially recognised and their adherents are required to follow rules banning large gatherings. [11] Training in "socialist values" is a requirement for believers. [12] The Falun Gong religious movement is completely banned since around 10,000 practitioners gathered around Zhongnanhai, the central government's compound in Beijing, on 25 April 1999, resulting in a decision to completely eradicate it from China. [13] However, the most notorious problem for Europeans is China's repression of separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as the ongoing clampdown on proponents of democratic values in Hong Kong.

Xinjiang is an autonomous region in northwest China whose majority population consists of Muslim Uyghurs. The Uyghurs are a Turkic people with an ethnic, linguistic and religious identity which is distinct from that of the majority Han Chinese. A wave of Uyghur violence against Han Chinese induced the Chinese government to systematically repress separatism in Xinjiang province. Violence provoking that reaction included: 2009 riots in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province; [14] a 2014 knife attack at Kunming station which killed 31 people and injured 143; [15] and a 2013 attempt to bomb Tiananmen Square in Beijing. [16] As a result, the CCP took a zero-tolerance approach to dissent in Xinjiang, which is a key BRI corridor

and a vital source of natural resources including oil. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur separatist group, was heavily targeted and its remaining members were forced to disperse into neighbouring countries. [17] Internment facilities labelled as “re-education camps” were built across Xinjiang in which many Uyghurs were detained. They were given training in patriotism and the dangers of “religious radicalism”. [18] Residents’ internet access was restricted and monitored: beginning in 2014, they were required to login with an identification number in order to publish information on the internet. [19] There are many reports of families being forcibly separated, with children whose parents have been interned being committed to care facilities. [20]

Although it has taken a backseat to Xinjiang in the Western media in recent years, Tibet has been on the Western radar for much longer than Xinjiang. When People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops occupied Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama fled across the Himalayas to India with 80,000 of his followers. [21] Since then, Tibet has been in the Western consciousness as a land of Buddhists oppressed by Chinese invaders. Many Western politicians have met the now-aging Dalai Lama, whom Beijing depicts as a separatist endangering China’s unity. [22] The CCP defends itself by insisting that Tibet – which contains the sources of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers – has been part of China “since ancient times.” [23] This means that there is no possibility that Beijing will ever contemplate allowing Tibet to gain independence.

The human rights situation in Hong Kong has been steadily worsening (from a Western standpoint) since the former British colony was returned to the PRC in 1997. There has been a steady tightening of control by the central government. Pro-democracy protests have been suppressed by security forces. Despite promises of ‘one country, two systems’, Hong Kong’s Legislative Council was overhauled in 2021 to ensure, in Xi Jinping’s words, that there were “patriots governing Hong Kong”. [24] The power of voters to elect candidates who would challenge central government policies has been reduced by limiting the number of members of the Legislative Council who can be directly elected; the rest of the members are now chosen by a pro-Beijing election committee. [25] The central government is clearly now determined to ensure control over the territory, far in advance of the formal expiry of the ‘one country, two systems’ principle in 2047. For the CCP, the principle of social harmony – meaning suppression of any elements that would challenge the government and upset the carefully maintained order – takes precedence over civil, democratic and individual human rights in Hong Kong.

The EU’s dilemma: European values versus economic pragmatism

In this context, with CCP policies clearly contradicting core EU values, one would expect criticism from European states. Indeed, this has come at intervals. However, European officials dare not challenge China too vociferously or continuously because of the perception that there will be potential economic and even political repercussions. Any action which China sees as an attack on its interests tends to be met with retaliation against the offending nation – even

if this is often symbolic rather than impactful, as in the imposition of sanctions on Norway in response to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo. [26] Since the economic fortunes of European countries such as Germany have become closely intertwined with China, officials often dare not disrupt relations through provocative statements which might offend the Chinese government and lead to repercussions.

There are numerous examples of the consequences of criticising China's human rights record. When the French president Nicolas Sarkozy said he was considering boycotting the Olympic Games in March 2008 because of its approach to Tibet, there followed an attempt by French protesters to snatch the Olympic torch away from a disabled Chinese athlete in Paris. Subsequently, Chinese shoppers boycotted French-owned Carrefour supermarkets in China, impacting the company's business. [27] A ban on government officials in Xinjiang province travelling to the EU induced a similar ban on various EU officials and scholars visiting China, producing a prolonged diplomatic row. [28] Lithuania's relations with China soured after it decided to allow Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius with the word 'Taiwanese' in its name instead of 'Taipei', which Beijing interpreted as an attempt to undermine its 'One China' policy. [29]

What all this means is that EU policymakers are forced to constantly weigh up the pros and cons of criticising China, balancing economic pragmatism against European values. There is a lack of consistency and clarity in this regard, with various officials and countries promoting different policy directions. In particular, while nations such as Lithuania and the Czech Republic have often decided to take a values-based position towards the PRC, others, chiefly Hungary, openly pursue economic cooperation without condemnation. The remainder seem to vacillate somewhere on the spectrum between, their positions often swinging from one side to the other depending on the current state of public opinion.

Clearly, there is a need for more consistent policy on the issue of what to do about China's human rights record. But at the time of writing this appears to be as far away as ever. From a pragmatic perspective, it is not even clear that anything can be done to affect the issue. Any statements on the topic risk being labelled as empty rhetoric ignored by Chinese officials. Meanwhile, any decisions to take action lead only in the direction of vituperative economic or political sanctions from the Chinese side, followed by rapid backtracking on the EU side, creating an enduring impression of European weakness and vacillation.

China's view of human rights: civil-political versus economic-social, relativism versus universalism

The Chinese government insists on non-interference in its domestic policy as an integral element of respect for Chinese national sovereignty. China insists not only on respect for its own sovereignty, but also (at least in principle) respect for the sovereignty of other nations. [30] This connects to both the Westphalian concept of sovereignty and the UN Charter concerning the rights of nations to self-determination within their territorial borders. [31] For this reason,

the CCP takes criticism of its approach to Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong as an assault on its right to govern as it sees fit. The Chinese government reacts immediately and angrily to any attacks on its approach to these regions: it cannot tolerate the implied challenge to its rule, because if allowed to continue this has the potential to undermine its legitimacy within China, provoking dissent.

This explains the rationale behind the Chinese government's promotion of a relativist rather than universalist interpretation of human rights. Essentially, it is up to every sovereign nation to decide how to decide about the rights of its own citizens according to local culture and norms, rather than to follow the dictates of the Western-led understanding of universal human rights. Within China's relativism there is a focus on benefits for the collective rather than the individual, in conformity with the underlying principles of both Communism and Confucianism.

Tied into this is the Chinese insistence on the importance for its development of promoting economic-social (positive) rights, while limiting civil-political (negative) rights. The idea is that China as an economically developing country needs to prioritise lifting as many citizens as possible out of poverty by providing them with housing, education, food and healthcare. The good of the majority, in the utilitarian sense, comes first. According to this ranking of interests, individual rights, if they conflict with the collective interest, must be limited. So, for instance, if individuals broach uncomfortable topics that upset the social harmony and potentially impact the smooth course of economic development, censorship is imposed. If a minority group (such as Uyghurs) uses violence against the majority group (Han Chinese), then, according to the Chinese government's rationale, its right to freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and even freedom of belief must be suppressed.

Such is the rationale behind Chinese government policy on rights: the individual, if his/her actions conflict with the majority interest and the effort to prioritise the economy in the interest of promoting economic-social rights, is crushed by the weight of the collective. And in order that China's unity and social harmony are maintained and the Chinese Communist Party retains power there can be no compromise concerning this approach. The rights of one or a few individuals to protest and upset the social order simply do not count when compared to the rights of the majority to improve their basic living conditions. This is the calculation that the CCP, in its own interests as well as what it perceives as the interests of the Chinese nation, makes in regard to human rights.

This has important repercussions when considering China's relations with the Global South. The model of human rights promoted by the Chinese government appeals to economically less developed countries because it corresponds to the calculation that their governments have to make. If citizens are short of basic requirements such as food, energy, education, healthcare and transport infrastructure, then ruling elites must prioritise providing such goods in order to retain legitimacy. As long as leaders do this, they can probably retain the support of the majority of the population. This is exactly the approach which has been taken

by the Chinese government since the Deng era. In the meantime, if there are minorities who protest and seek to bring down the government, they must be suppressed and freedom of speech restricted in order to maintain sufficient social stability to foster economic development. If economic development and stability in less developed countries are facilitated by Chinese investments, and China thence comes to be viewed as an example to imitate, then there is all the more reason to follow the Chinese model on both the economy and human rights.

The result of all this is an authoritarian, collectivist and relativist approach to governance and human rights in many countries in the Global South which are supported by China. Economic-social rights are prioritised over civil-political ones, which are often even actively suppressed by governments. Yet at the same time, as we shall see in the next section, this is not leading to China becoming unpopular in most of its partner countries. China is seen as helping economic development through BRI investments, loans, and infrastructure, and thence as promoting the economic-social rights of the majority (even if the latter idea is not voiced as explicitly as this). At the same time, the EU and US insistence on the development of democracy and civil-political rights is viewed increasingly negatively by many. This is because it is seen as both unproductive in economic terms, but also as hypocritical in terms of Europe's colonial past, for which it is seen as having not yet made full amends, and the US's present foreign policy under Trump (increasingly perceived as being anti-Global South).

Views of China in the Global South

Global support for China has been growing steadily since the 1960s. In that decade, more countries endorsed the Republic of China (Taiwan) than the PRC. However, Taiwan's support eroded steadily over the decades as China's long-term 'charm offensive' – consisting chiefly of non-interference in a country's domestic politics and economic investments – gradually won nations to its side. [32] In 1971, a majority in the UN voted to switch China's permanent membership of the UN Security Council from the ROC to the PRC despite resistance from the United States. By 2022, only one African country – Eswatini – continued to maintain official ties with Taipei, down from 19 in 1962. [33] Still, for many countries lingering doubts about the value of supporting the PRC remained into the post-Cold War era. Even during the early years of the Xi Jinping presidency, many countries hesitated to switch their support to China, with the US remaining more popular.

The situation has changed markedly since 2023. In this year the Israeli occupation of Gaza began in response to the 7th October Hamas cross-border attack on Israeli citizens. Since Israel had the support of the US and there was an absence of outright condemnation in Europe, views of the US in some Muslim countries subsequently declined, while perceptions of China remained the same or improved in comparison. After Donald Trump became president for the second time in January 2025, and began cutting US aid programmes to the Global South, surveys during the year revealed a deepening of the swing away from the US and towards

China. [34] For instance, a poll by the Economist conducted between July and September 2025 revealed that China's popularity had overtaken the US in Indonesia, South Africa and Mexico, with favourability rising particularly markedly among younger people. [35]

As of early 2026, with the Trump regime being widely perceived as increasingly authoritarian, erratic, and inclined to use of military force against countries such as Venezuela and Iran (not to mention against its own citizens via ICE actions in American cities), China was coming to be seen by many in the Global South as a more stable, reliable and responsible partner. China's human rights record, which was beginning to look not so much worse than that of the US, was not an impediment to its growing popularity. Nira Data's May 2025 survey of 96 countries revealed that 76 of them had a more positive view of China than the United States. [36] Muslim countries in particular took a dim view of US support for Israel in Gaza, pushing them towards China regardless of possible abuses of the Muslim population of Xinjiang. [37] Broadly speaking, the Global South was moving away from the US and the EU and towards China, with China's approach to human rights apparently not affecting the growth in its popularity there – and perhaps even enhancing it.

Conclusion

As American global soft power has been on the decline, China's vision of a global order based on Confucian-style social harmony which prioritises the collective over the individual has gradually become more acceptable, at least in some Global South countries. Fukuyama's vision of an 'end of history', in which Western-style democratisation was supposed to roll out across the whole globe, ending authoritarianism, has not come to pass. [38] In fact, there has been a rollback towards right-wing populist regimes even in some democratic countries, not least among them the United States.

At the same time, what one might call the 'China model' of governance and human rights has gained a certain degree of traction, even if not yet overwhelmingly so. Meanwhile, the notion of 'normative power Europe' has begun to fade from view as Europe comes to be seen as a dis-united and ineffective actor. The perceived success of the PRC in raising hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty while not changing to a Western-style system of governance and individual rights has given China's approach credibility as an alternative to Western ideas on the universality of individual human rights. A 2025 Afrobarometer poll shows that 60 per cent of African respondents in 29 countries viewed China positively, compared to figures of 53 per cent for the U.S. and only 49 per cent for the EU. [40]

For the EU, this leaves some tough decisions. Is it best to keep pursuing principled normative diplomacy in the Global South, refusing to work with authoritarian regimes with spotty human rights records and pressuring them to reform? Or is it better to engage with the leaders of such countries regardless of their political systems, seeking to challenge Chinese influence? Either way – and one would suggest more active engagement as a pragmatic measure – the EU needs to develop more consistent policy towards both China and the Global South if it is

to promote its values around the world and counter what is now the ever-more prevailing Chinese political and human rights model.

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