

# **US Politicization of Human Rights Erodes Foundations of Human Rights Governance**

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Since the end of WWII, global human rights practices have repeatedly proved that rejecting the politics-oriented mentality and discussing and promoting human rights on an equal and rational basis is a major prerequisite for the international community to properly handle human rights issues and conduct exchange and cooperation in this regard. For this reason, measures taken purposely to politicize human rights issues could prove fatal to global human rights governance. This has become a fundamental consensus reached by the international community on human rights.

The term “politicization of human rights” refers to the propensity and process that actors in international relations, out of certain political motives, deal with

human rights issues in an attitude of political utilitarianism to realize certain political interests. The politicization of human rights has the following patterns of manifestation: (1) Human rights issues are treated in selective rather than universal ways; (2) Human rights conditions are evaluated by double standards rather than objective standards; (3) Differences in human rights issues are dealt with through confrontation rather than dialogue; and (4) Divergences over human rights issues are resolved through unilateral coercion rather than multilateral cooperation.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) advocates the non-politicization of human rights and a universal and objective attitude toward human rights issues. The UNHRC upholds multilateralism and calls for the elimination of human rights politicization through constructive dialogue and international solidarity and cooperation. Resolution 60/251 of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) underscores “the importance of ensuring universality, objectivity and non-selectivity in consideration of human rights issues, and the elimination of double standards and

politicization.” The UNHRC’s Resolution 5/1 demands that “the universal periodic review should be conducted in an objective, transparent, non-selective, constructive, non-confrontational and non-politicized manner,” and that “the principles of objectivity, non-selectivity, and the elimination of double standards and politicization should apply.” Moreover, a communication...shall be admissible, provided that it is “not manifestly politically motivated” and “not resorting to politically motivated stands contrary to the provisions of the *Charter of the United Nations*.” The UNHRC’s Resolution 47/9 emphasizes that “human rights dialogue should be constructive and based on the principles of universality, indivisibility, objectivity, non-selectivity, non-politicization, mutual respect and equal treatment.”

However, to maintain its political interests and global hegemony, the United States has brazenly resorted to human rights politicization in the international community through such means as adopting selective and double standards and imposing unilateral coercion. Its behaviors have seriously eroded the foundation that underlies the global human rights governance, gravely

threatened the international development of human rights cause, and generated outrageously destructive consequences.

## **I. The historical process of US politicization of human rights**

Generally speaking, the US politicization of human rights can be divided into three stages. The first stage is before the 1970s when the US adopted the international human rights standards after a fashion but still snubbed or even rejected them. The second stage was from the 1970s to the end of the Cold War when the US promoted “human rights diplomacy” and used human rights as a political tool to attack the former Soviet Union. The third stage started from the end of the Cold War and has lasted ever since, during which the US has arbitrarily imposed upon other countries its own human rights values as a “soft power” and suppressed countries of different political systems in the attempt to maintain US dominant status in the world.

### **(I) Period I: The US snubbed and rejected international human rights**

While *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

(UDHR) was in the making, the US government expressed verbal support while stressing that it should be no more than an inspiring document with no binding force. It insisted on making the articles on human rights as ambiguous as possible, strongly objected to the initiative proposed by some countries and organizations to detail those articles and the obligations to be borne by each member state. After the UDHR was adopted, the American representative said that only one article – Article 22 – applies to the US, and only one sentence in Article 22 has any value, which is that whether the UDHR could be put into practice depends on “the organization and resources of each State.”

After 1953, America’s attitude toward internationally acknowledged human rights shifted from reluctance and unwillingness to support to outright indifference. Soon after he came into power, Eisenhower announced that his administration would keep a distance from *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and claimed that its domestic and foreign policies would not be bound by human rights obligations. The UN passed in 1960 the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to*

*Colonial Countries and Peoples* and other measures providing moral support and political legitimacy to anti-colonialist forces, which the US either voted against or simply abstained. The same happened to many other human rights treaties. The US was ambiguous about the UN's efforts to support South Africa's struggle against the apartheid system in the 1960s because that was at odds with its long-term strategic interests in the country. At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States, out of consideration of national security, regarded the democratizing Guatemalan government of Árbenz as the expansion of Soviet Communist forces in the country, and finally overthrew the democratically elected government of Guatemala through two secret operations and the combination of diplomatic pressure and psychological warfare. This became a common pattern for the United States to interfere in the internal affairs of Latin American countries.

**(II) Period II: “Human Rights Diplomacy” was incorporated into the US political strategy**

US Congress began to take human rights as an important topic in the multilateral foreign policy in the

mid-1970s, linking human rights with security assistance, economic assistance, and the US' votes in international financial institutions. After Jimmy Carter was elected US president in 1977, he formally put forth the slogan of "human rights diplomacy" and called human rights the "cornerstone" and "soul" of America's foreign policy. In his book, *Ideal Illusions: How the U.S. Government Co-opted Human Rights*, American historian and foreign relations scholar James Peck said Washington was eager to find a new ideological weapon in the Cold War and human rights just came in handy. In Peck's opinion, the more a country emphasizes something, the more it wants to hide it. The US committed appalling atrocities in Vietnam, from destroying crops and forests and forced relocation of the people to the bombing of civilians and execution of the Phoenix Program. It supported the military tyranny in Chile, Guatemala, the Philippines, and Angola, and the CIA carried out secret infiltration in European and Asian countries. The more these outrageous facts were exposed and criticized, the harder American politicians clamored about their human rights concepts to whitewash the US national image.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's human rights policy was based on American "exceptionalism" and the Cold War policy. The proponents of exceptionalism claimed that the US grasped the truth of human rights during the Enlightenment and implemented it in the early stage of the American Revolution. Therefore, the US should be looked up to as a model for its obligations for civil rights and political rights, and it needed no international human rights standards. The Reagan administration criticized the Carter administration for being "naive" on human rights issues and tried to bring them back to the Cold-War track. At the UN, the Reagan administration openly accused communist countries of violating human rights while taking sides with its allies such as Chile, Argentina, and Guatemala. Explicitly using human rights as a tool to compete with the Soviet Union and its allies, it demanded that the UN give priority to the discussion of the communist regime's violation of human rights, especially the human rights issues in Cuba while turning a blind eye to the human rights issues in many other countries. The US was also persistently passive about the



*UN's Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.*

**(III) Period III: the US rammed its view on human rights down the throats of other countries**

After the end of the Cold War, the US grew an inexplicable sense of superiority about its political system and an institutional arrogance and prejudice against countries that implemented a different political system, believing that only the American system was reasonable and universal. President Bush once again put human rights at the center of America's foreign policy. When giving a speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on August 29, 1996, President Clinton said, "I want to build a bridge to the 21st century that makes sure we are still the nation with the world's strongest defense, that our foreign policy still advances the values of our American community in the community of nations." With such institutional arrogance, the US has been blatantly enforcing a global democracy movement, whereby it launches rigorous public opinion attacks and suppression of any non-Western political system and labels relevant countries as "undemocratic," "autocratic,"

and even “rogue states.”

After the September 11 attacks and the US deployment of military forces to Afghanistan and its invasion of Iraq, the US made itself the primary violator of other countries’ human rights. In the name of counterterrorism, the US Department of Justice denied the international law on human rights. Torture, assassination, and other actions that severely violated human rights emerged one after another, which were widely criticized in the international community. The US National Security Agency, on the ground of national security, set in motion a campaign targeting foreign intelligence, under which it tapped and collected the personal information of foreign political figures and American citizens and violated their privacy, causing widespread outcries.

## **II. The deep-rooted reason for and manifestations of US politicization of human rights**

The historical trajectory of America’s attitude towards human rights indicates that it has always viewed human rights as a tool for political struggle, both when it snubbed and rejected the subject in the early stage and

when it wielded the baton of human rights around later. Its attitude hinges on to what extent human rights can serve its political strategy.

### **(I) Deep-rooted reason for US politicization of human rights**

The deep-rooted reason for US politicization of human rights is the fundamental conflict between international human rights standards and America's own human rights situation and its global strategy. For one thing, the US is infested with serious human rights issues, including racial discrimination, gun abuse, violent enforcement of the law, and social polarization. For another, America's allies in the international community are also serious violators of human rights by the standards pronounced by the US. Furthermore, the US, to maintain its global hegemony, has constantly waged aggressive wars, interfered in other states' internal affairs, and violated their sovereignty, all of which go counter to the principles of human rights. It's as clear as day that the US cannot put human rights it clamors about into practice, much less stay aligned with international human rights standards. When the whole international

community is making united efforts to make human rights the common moral standard in global governance, the US, to enhance its “soft power,” has no choice but to follow the general trend, using it as a banner to cover up and dress up its rap sheet of human rights violations. However, the fundamental conflict between these international standards and America’s global strategy stays, and the US would inevitably use the principles of human rights in a highly politicized way.

## **(II) US politicization of human rights shown in three manifestations**

Given the conflict between its global strategy and international human rights standards, the US either gives up the latter to defend its hegemony, or selectively applies them to serve its political interests, or simply uses them as an excuse to label countries threatening its political interests as “human rights violators,” thus cloaking its breach of their sovereignty with a moral veil.

### **1. Disregarding the basic concept of human rights to pursue political interests**

The “Dulles doctrine” that the US put forth in the 1950s planted such an idea that competing with the

Soviet Union was contributing to human rights. Dulles saw the UN as the best rostrum to condemn America's communist rivals, the Eisenhower administration paid more attention to "moral anti-communism" than to international acknowledged human rights, and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations put anti-communism on top of their agenda and human rights issue on the third spot. Robert M. Gates, former Director of Central Intelligence Agency and Secretary of Defense, wrote that president Carter launched an ideological war against the Soviet Union with resolve and strength never seen in previous presidents of the United States, by attacking the legitimacy of the Soviet government and fully supporting any dissident in the country.

## **2. Exercising double standards on human rights with discriminations between US political friends and foes**

When promoting human rights diplomacy and handling human rights affairs, the US doesn't comply with the uniform international standards or guarantee human rights from a just and objective perspective. It always exercises double or even multiple standards.

First of all, it upholds one set of standards for its own human rights issues and another set for those in other countries. Turning a blind eye to the myriad systematic human rights violations at home, the US never mentions these issues, such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, permissive gun laws, violence, crime, racism and the human rights issues of immigrants in its annual country reports on human rights practices, while always pointing fingers at other countries in a condescending way.

Second, it upholds one set of standards for its allies or friendly states and another set for countries that have a different ideology, political and social system, and conflicts of interests with it. In the Human Rights Memo submitted by the Reagan administration to the Congress, the Reagan administration stipulated the “active” and “passive” human rights standards, the former applying to the socialist countries in East Europe, with the harshest punishments on their rights-violating acts, while the latter applying to America’s allies no matter how serious the violation was. The annual country reports on human rights released by the US exaggerate the human rights

conditions in developing countries, socialist countries, and other “unfriendly” countries but downplay or cover up such issues in its allies.

Third, the US adopts different human rights standards to a country in different periods. If a country adopts a policy at a certain point that betrays the interests of the US government, “human rights issue” can be used to criticize, threaten or sanction that country; if the country panders to the interests of the US government, then “human rights issue” will be less important and incentives will be employed.

Fourth, the US adopts a different attitude toward different human rights issues in different periods. After the end of WWII, the US was quite indifferent to human rights and didn't change its position until, especially after what happened in Hungary in 1956. Reports by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicated that the US began to take a supportive position because it believed that establishing an international system on refugees would be a powerful weapon in the struggle between the East and the West.

Fifth, the US adopts a different attitude toward

different types of rights. Entrenched in its own economic and political system, the US has one attitude towards economic, social, and cultural rights and another towards civil rights and politics, one attitude toward liberty and another toward the rights to subsistence and development – emphasizing the former but downplaying or denying the latter.

No matter how many forms these selective and double standards take on, their ultimate purpose is to make human rights serve America's global hegemony and curb the development of socialist countries. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to ex-US President Jimmy Carter, proclaimed in his book *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* that human rights are a provident strategic choice that will push the transition of communist countries to democracies and accelerate the decline of communism.

### **3. The US wielding the baton of human rights in violation of the sovereignty of other countries**

The US combines economic, political, and military approaches with human rights to achieve its purpose of



human rights diplomacy. On the one hand, it links human rights with economic assistance – countries that accept its assistance must also accept its human rights standards. On the other hand, it takes armed actions against those countries that resist its human rights diplomacy to pursue its purpose.

All US administrations have made maintaining America's hegemony and preventing the appearance of a major Asian-Pacific country that would threaten it as their strategic core. China, for realistic reasons, has become its prime target, with "human rights" being a useful card to contain its rise. According to James Peck, a scholar at New York University, the anti-China faction within the US government still believes today that human rights are the last ideological weapon against China and a project that will bring doomsday to the Communist Party of China. They argue that they cannot count on China's economic collapse and they must resort to the political weapon of human rights to bring it down from within. In 2000, US Congress formed the Congressional-Executive Commission on China that, monitoring China's human rights conditions in all respects, represented the common

interests of Congress, the government's national security agency, business groups, and human rights organizations.

Analyzing a huge amount of historical materials, James Peck concluded that the so-called human rights advocated by the US government are not in the least related to the genuine concept and that the country only takes advantage of the banner of human rights to advance its global strategy. The US government has gradually turned human rights into a discourse power to promote its diplomatic policies, or more precisely, a tool to promote America's ideology and public diplomacy.

### **III. US politicization of human rights seriously undermines global governance of human rights**

The US politicization of human rights has brought disastrous effects on global human rights governance. It has hindered the normal development of the international cause of human rights, plunged some countries into chaos, and profaned the sacred concept and ideal of human rights.

**First, the US politicization of human rights hinders the sound development of the cause of human rights at the global level.** Dividing the world based on

political interests, the US has precluded the possibility of having a normal dialogue between those holding different views on human rights and turned the UN human rights body into a battlefield of political confrontation. This not only hurts the development of the global cause of human rights but also keeps America's own human rights conditions in a chronically poor state. Samuel Moyn, a professor of Columbia Law School, and other scholars held that as the politicians in the US who are good at playing with power politics treated human rights issues with scorn and contempt, the so-called "human rights revolution" in the 1940s came to an abrupt end right after its birth. From the end of the 1940s to the early 1970s, human rights issues came to a "dead zone" because, as many scholars believed, the US didn't take an active part in international actions on this subject amid Cold War politics.

Second, interfering in the internal affairs of other countries on the excuse of human rights, the US has created national turmoil in other countries and started new human rights disasters. The US' violation of the sovereignty of other countries has led to wars and loss of

lives in the intervened and invaded countries, resulting in new human rights disasters. US scholars Seung-Whan Choi and James Patrick revealed that the US generally employs four policy tools to sell its human rights values to the international community. The first is military interference, which is what happened in Iraq and Kosovo, where the US launched wars on the pretext of their state of human rights. The second is military assistance, meaning that the US government provides weapons to the militarists of specific factions on the excuse of eliminating the human rights crisis. The third is economic sanction. The most typical way to use this tool is first labeling certain countries as the so-called “rogue states” and then instigating American allies to cut off economic ties with it. The fourth is economic assistance, which is widely used in the diplomatic policies towards Latin American countries, who are demanded to improve their human rights according to American standards if they are to accept the economic assistance. The two researchers, through a comparative analysis of the data of 144 countries over nearly 30 years, concluded that almost all of America’s diplomatically driven output of

human rights since WWII have failed. Its military interference in Iraq is a failure, so is its economic assistance to Latin American countries, as basic human rights are not fully guaranteed in those areas even until today. This fully proves that using human rights as a strategic tool will not truly improve human rights; rather, it will lead to new human rights disasters.

Last but not least, taking human rights merely as a tool to implement its global strategy, the US has profaned the lofty ideal of human rights. The US blatantly exercised double standards, ignored, indeed even indulged, true violations of human rights. In the meantime, it has slammed policies and measures that are genuinely aimed at protecting human rights and even imposed economic sanctions, political pressuring, or military deterrence on countries adopting them. What America has done has seriously tainted mankind's long-cherished ideal of human rights and reduced the concept into no more than an excuse and tool for its outrage against human rights in other countries. As Xu Yicong, former Chinese ambassador to Cuba, pointed out, the human rights concept advocated by them is a political

baton, a tool it uses to interfere in the internal affairs and subvert the legitimate regime in other countries and a politicized approach and tactic. It is never intended to respect human rights. Whenever there was unrest and disturbance somewhere in the world, we could hear them chanting about human rights. When sovereign states were dealing with insurgents endangering national sovereignty and security, we could see the West wielding its baton of human rights. In the final analysis, they are politicizing human rights with ulterior motives, and that is essentially and exactly a show of disrespect for human rights.

The US politicization of human rights has eroded and ruined the global foundation of human rights governance and incurred disastrous consequences to the global cause of human rights. It has been extensively condemned and criticized by the just forces in the international community. At the General Debate of the Third Committee of the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly on October 7, 2021, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, made the following statement: "At the Third Committee, the

US and a few other countries are provoking confrontation, pointing fingers at other developing countries' human rights situation, and brazenly launching smear campaigns. At the same time, they choose to stay silent on their own issues and turn a blind eye to the terrible human rights records of their allies... In total disregard of facts, the US and a few other countries are fabricating lies...making groundless accusations against China, and using human rights to interfere in China's internal affairs. These moves are firmly opposed and resolutely rejected by the Chinese Government and people." Representatives from Egypt, Algeria, Chad, Turkmenistan, Belarus, and Venezuela all underscored in their speeches that the people of each country have the right to independently choose their path of human rights development according to national conditions. They firmly opposed the politicization of human rights, the exercise of double standards, and the interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

The disastrous consequences of US politicization of human rights have made people realize, ever more deeply, that the non-politicization of human rights is the

foundation and precondition for smooth global governance of human rights and that preventing and curbing human rights politicization is an important guarantee for promoting the sound development of the international human rights cause. To safeguard its own interests, the US, acting against the historical trend, has doubled up its acts of politicization that have damaged the healthy mechanism of global human rights development and pushed many countries one after another into the swirl of social turbulence. People across the world, having seen through its mask of “human rights defender,” have stood up to oppose its despicable moves. As a result, the global hegemony that the US has tried so hard to maintain will be shaken, and the bell for its decline will toll amid the song of triumph celebrating the development of human rights worldwide.