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For decades, the United States has failed to address the abysmal human rights record of China, the world's most populous nation, with sufficient clarity or strength.

As President Obama meets Chinese President Hu Jintao, he has a unique opportunity to correct this failure. For the sake of freedom, and the ultimate interests of both countries, he should seize the opportunity, advocating a new approach to conventional U.S.-China diplomacy. He should proclaim that a fundamental aim of our China policy is the expansion of liberty, including freedom of religion and belief.

Religion, like capitalism, is expanding rapidly in China. Involving hundreds of millions of people, it is one of the biggest parts of China's civil society, a point not lost on senior-level Communist officials. President Hu has acknowledged this fact, as well as the notion that religion can promote "morality" and "economic and social development."

Yet while China is lightening the regulatory load on business, it continues its egregious oppression of religious groups and individuals. Official recognition of religion is limited to those religious groups that have effectively surrendered control to the government by "registering" with the authorities.

Groups that refuse to register or that peacefully resist attempts at government control are deemed enemies of the state and are treated as such. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and movements like the Falun Gong face severe sanctions, including fines, confiscation of property, imprisonment, and torture in detention, as well as control over the selection of religious leaders, as evidenced in November by the appointment of a Catholic bishop without papal recognition. Thousands of individuals languish in jail and hundreds more are detained each year for peacefully expressing their beliefs or desire for greater religious freedom.

Chinese lawyers who defend religious freedom are often dealt the harshest abuse. There have been a number of "disappearances" of such advocates, most notably Gao Zhisheng, who defended Tibetans, Uighurs, the Falun Gong, and unregistered Protestants.

China's leaders insist that their goal is to strengthen and stabilize their nation. Yet their continued repression of peaceful religious minorities does nothing of the sort, and runs counter to their policies of greater freedom elsewhere, especially on the economic front. It is creating potentially massive discontent at home, while seriously harming China's image abroad.

China's policies fly in the face of abundant evidence suggesting that the way to create more peaceful, prosperous, and stable societies is not by repression, but through freedom. It is by respecting the dignity and worth of people, empowering and encouraging their participation in civil society by protecting their liberties. In line with its expansion of economic freedom, Beijing seems to understand this on trade issues, but a nation as big and diverse as China will remain neither stable nor strong by denying the parallel right of religious freedom. For both China and the world, freedom of religion and belief is no luxury, but a necessity.

As President Obama meets with President Hu, he can raise the issue of religious freedom as a matter of conscience. But equally important, he can challenge China to consider the tangible fruits -- diplomatic, security, political, and socio-economic -- it can obtain from fully protecting and promoting religious freedom and related human rights.

While public condemnations may be necessary, they are insufficient. Even when combined with private conversations, they will not move this rising power. The Administration must go beyond mere words, demonstrating that it believes respect for religious freedom is a fundamental strategic interest, and integrating this understanding into its overall China policy.

To that end, we strongly urge the Administration to do the following: become a consistent

voice for those Chinese activists who are arrested and harassed; pursue religious freedom concerns in the various multilateral forums where the U.S. and China are members; coordinate with allies on pursuing a consistent human rights diplomacy regarding China; encourage the development and distribution of technologies to counter Internet censorship; and negotiate binding human rights agreements at the highest level of U.S.-China diplomacy -- the Economic and Strategic Dialogue.

If the President takes such action, it would advance our national interest and ultimately that of China by promoting freedom and its many benefits. For the sake of both nations, the President should use this meeting to ensure that religious freedom in China will be neither ignored nor bargained away again.

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