



**Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development,
Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic, Energy,
and Environmental Policy**

***“Challenges and Opportunities for
Advancing U.S. Interests in the
United Nations System”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman Young, Ranking Member Merkley, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding a hearing on this important topic and offering me an opportunity to speak.

I am the Director of the Human Rights Initiative at CSIS and previously worked for the UN Special Representative on Business and Human Rights.

Today, I will address how U.S. disengagement at the UN at a moment of shifting geopolitics is severely damaging to U.S. influence and to human rights. I will also offer recommendations on how to reassert leadership.

The Administration signaled its lack of confidence and interest in the UN system. It pulled out of the UN Human Rights Council (“HRC”) and the U.S. was left without an Ambassador to the UN for nine months. This was a mistake. The UN system is not perfect, but is still an important forum for advancing democracy, human rights, and good governance around the world.

US disengagement could not be more poorly timed. It has created a vacuum that pernicious actors are using to advance agendas that are counter to human rights and thus counter to the long-term interests of the U.S. and its allies. Faltering U.S. leadership has coincided with a rise in Chinese engagement, which is long-term, strategic, and aimed at altering the rules of global governance. In principle, having more countries engaged at the UN is positive, but it is problematic when they seek to undermine human rights and civil society there. I’ll focus on China due to its increasing leadership in the UN system, although it is not the only government seeking to undermine human rights and other core values.

China is advancing several goals at the UN.¹ First, it seeks to avoid scrutiny of its own abuses. Second, it seeks to weaken human rights and global governance by advancing new ideologies at the UN.

How does this play out in practice?

UN human rights bodies have struggled to engage in any oversight over the situation in Xinjiang, despite the abuses against Muslim minorities there. Moreover, twenty-two countries drafted a letter that they submitted to the president of the HRC expressing concern about the human rights situation in Xinjiang. In an unprecedented move, China convinced 37 countries to write a rebuttal, praising its treatment of its Muslim minorities. European governments involved in the situation have expressed the urgent need for the U.S. to re-engage so this does not happen again.

The UN has long provided for civil society organizations to have official consultative status at the UN, with the idea that this enhances transparency and is consistent with democratic norms. Chinese diplomats at the UN have intimidated NGOs and journalists on UN grounds and sought

¹ For an excellent discussion of these issues, see China's Long Game on Human Rights at The United Nations, Ted Piccone, September 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20181009_china_human_rights.pdf.

to have them banned. They have tried to have Tibetan and Uyghur organizations stripped of their accreditation.²

I've described actions by China to avoid criticism at the UN. But the U.S. needs to be focused on the long game, which is playing out across multiple UN agencies. This occurs through the insertion of Chinese ideology into UN documents and through senior-level appointments.

For example, a recent China-sponsored resolution in the HRC called for “mutually beneficial cooperation” in human rights – a euphemism for state-requested capacity building to be the main means to promote human rights at the UN.³ It supports the principle of non-interference and would help China and other abusive states reject UN oversight over human rights. China could then escape UN scrutiny for Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. This approach easily gains the support of other autocratic states, and China increasingly makes economic threats against other, more democratic nations so that it benefits from their votes.

Other bodies also matter for human rights. There is a risk, for example, that the International Telecommunication Union (“ITU”) will increasingly insert itself into internet governance, especially with the advent of 5G. The ITU is led by a Chinese national, and there are concerns that if the ITU increasingly intrudes into technology governance, this will advance a less free and open internet and society.

The U.S. can take a number of steps to ensure that the UN remains a forum supportive of human rights and democratic governance.

--It should rejoin the HRC. When the U.S. was part of the HRC, the body's membership included fewer of the worst human rights abusers, the number of resolutions targeting Israel dropped significantly, and the HRC passed more resolutions enabling oversight for abuses in places such as Syria.⁴ Many ascribe these positive developments to U.S. diplomacy, including our large mission that can do the leg work to garner needed votes on particular resolutions. It is clearly better for the U.S. to be in than out.

--The U.S. needs a “whole of UN” strategy. It should signal that the UN does matter as an institution that sets global norms and rules. The strategy should focus on strengthening support for human rights, democratic norms, and rule of law through the UN's many bodies, and deploy our talented diplomats accordingly. We should do this in close coordination with like-minded countries. We cannot go it alone and succeed.

--Congress should maintain or increase funding for UN agencies, and the Administration should cease trying to cut it.

² China's Long Game on Human Rights at The United Nations, Ted Piccone, September 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP_20181009_china_human_rights.pdf.

³ Is China Winning its fight against rights at the UN?, Sophie Richardson, The Hill, December 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/12/china-winning-its-fight-against-rights-un>.

⁴ Game Changer: the U.S. at the UN Human Rights Council, The Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, May 2017, <https://www.jbi-humanrights.org/files/jbi-briefing-paper---game-changer---us-on-unhrc-1.pdf>.

--Last, the U.S. needs to lead by example. Every country in the world can improve its human rights practices. We must engage with UN Special Rapporteurs that are exercising their oversight functions, or we make it very easy for other countries to thwart oversight and then cite the U.S. to justify their actions.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.