



Forum for American Leadership

President Biden's Approach to Human Rights and the Future of U.S. Foreign Policy

September 18, 2023

In 2020, then-candidate Joe Biden made protecting human rights abroad a centerpiece of his presidential campaign, [saying](#) he would “stand always for our values of human rights and dignity.” Two-and-a-half years into his administration, it is clear that Biden’s policies have fallen short of that lofty rhetoric. In an effort to promote progressive policy goals, the Biden Administration has failed to adequately address egregious human rights abuses, including genocide, worldwide.

This Forum for American Leadership brief details key areas where the Biden Administration falls short on human rights policy, including on China and Iran. To be a global leader in the twenty-first century, the United States must recognize that a moral edge is a strategic one. According to the [Reagan Institute's 2023 Summer Survey](#), 74% of Americans, including 67% of Republicans, believe it is important for the United States to stand up for human rights and democracy whenever possible. The next administration should implement a foreign policy with human rights as one of its key pillars because securing the dignity, freedom, and rights of all men, women, and children worldwide is not only right but would strengthen national security by undermining our adversaries.

Biden's Errors

- 1. China.** In one of his last acts in office, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [designated](#) China’s genocide of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang as such, and the Biden Administration [quickly upheld](#) this determination. In an effort to destroy the culture and civilization of the Muslim minority, the Chinese Communist Party has destroyed mosques and rounded up millions of Uyghurs and placed them in de facto concentration camps, where they are subject to “re-education,” slave labor, rape, torture, and death. It is one of the greatest attacks on human rights and systematic crimes against humanity since the Holocaust. However, the current administration’s record on the Uyghur genocide is concerning. They are undermining the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act through [insufficiently strong enforcement](#), and at the same time, American outbound capital flows have [helped facilitate](#) China’s crimes against humanity. Additionally, the Biden Administration has failed to hold those responsible for the genocide to account. While the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act authorizes sanctions against those responsible for the genocide, [only 12 persons](#) and PRC entities have been placed under Global Magnitsky Sanctions under Biden. As House China Select Committee Chairman Mike Gallagher [has noted](#), “The administration has sanctioned more PRC persons for illegal fishing than it has for genocide.” Why do they pursue this policy of appeasement and tacit approval of grave human rights abuses? It’s simple: Climate Envoy John Kerry [cares more](#) about reaching a climate arrangement with the PRC, one they are unlikely to abide by, than the administration cares about [preventing genocide](#).
- 2. Afghanistan.** The Biden Administration's [human rights failures](#) extend to the Middle East. The disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan has paved the way for the Taliban’s [brutal oppression](#) of women and girls, among other human rights abuses. According to the U.N.,

Afghanistan is now the [most repressive country](#) in the world for women and girls. However, according to data from the Departments of State and Homeland Security, [only 25% of those evacuated](#) during the non-combatant evacuation operation were woman and girls. Additionally, an estimated 96% of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa applicants who served alongside American troops were [left behind](#), immediately becoming targets for extrajudicial killings by the Taliban, due to the Administration's mismanaged withdrawal. Abandoning America's Afghan partners to the Taliban's brutal despotism is the opposite of a credible human rights strategy.

3. **Iran.** Rather than enforcing or imposing human rights sanctions on Iran's brutal regime, the Biden Administration has [received](#) Tehran's ruthless regime with open arms. Fueled by a desire to reach a new nuclear agreement, the Administration [failed to sufficiently support](#) the Iranian people in their struggle against the theocratic regime which censors, tortures, and kills them for the crime of [thinking and speaking freely](#). Instead, they are [unfreezing](#) \$6 billion in frozen Iranian assets as ransom for American hostages. Given that Iranian President Raisi [said](#) the money will be used "wherever we need it," the funds could end up supporting more human rights abuses against the Iranian people or terrorist groups.
4. **Venezuela.** According to a United Nations [report](#), Nicolas Maduro's regime is likely guilty of crimes against humanity that have produced the [world's worst refugee crisis outside of Ukraine](#), while extrajudicial killings and torture of political opponents run rampant. Maduro restricts freedom of speech and of the press, and his kleptocratic economy [starves its citizens](#). His regime has effectively banned civil society and continued to obstruct any viable electoral path out of the crisis. Meanwhile, in an effort to placate environmental activists at home, the Biden Administration has abandoned American energy production, opting instead to [re-engage](#) with the regime by [lifting sanctions](#) on its energy sector.
5. **United Nations Human Rights Council.** In 2018, the United States made the correct [decision](#) to withdraw from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Far from fulfilling its noble imperative, UNHRC, led by representatives of human rights abusers, ignores most violations of human rights while maintaining a bias against Israel. Autocrats have [used the Human Rights Council](#) to "inject their own counternarratives, introduce authoritarian norms that erode rights protections, shelter their cronies from scrutiny, and use resolutions to endorse their regressive ideas." Despite this, the Biden Administration rejoined the Council, [legitimizing](#) efforts by members to blunt criticism of their human rights records while ensuring that UNHRC will remain, at least for now, an untenable mechanism for advancing human rights.

The Right Approach

1. **Values and Strategy.** Protecting human rights abroad is not just the moral thing to do; it is in the national security interest of the United States. The greatest national security threats to the United States—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—are all oppressive autocracies. Similarly, as a [previous FAL paper](#) argued, war, terrorism, mass migration, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons are less likely when nations are controlled by free people and governments are accountable to their citizens. Russia's heinous crimes against

the people of Ukraine, including attacks against civilians, torture, and forced abductions of children, [illustrate](#) this contrast.

2. **Maximum Pressure, Not Just on Iran.** It is one thing, as candidate Biden did, to promise to defend human rights. It is another thing to act on those promises. The next administration needs to ratchet up pressure on oppressive regimes, not reduce it. Good starting points would be ceasing nuclear negotiations with Iran that ignore its support for terrorism in the region, imposing human rights sanctions on perpetrators of the Uyghur Genocide, and standing with the people of Venezuela by reimposing sanctions on its brutal dictator, increasing sanctions pressure on regime officials that obstruct the country's electoral process, divesting from Venezuelan energy, and supporting the democratic opposition.
3. **Robust International Presence and Cooperation.** The United States cannot protect global human rights withdrawn and alone but, as demonstrated above, many of the existing fora for human rights dialogue are no longer viable. In conjunction with allies, the United States should launch an [International Platform for Freedom](#), a new worldwide institution dedicated to supporting human rights in autocratic countries. The United States should foster the [human rights leadership of new, middle power democracies](#) dedicated to making human rights an element of their foreign policy. It is also critical for the next administration to encourage our allies to levy their own sanctions on human rights abusers. In order to seriously prevent Uyghur forced labor, for example, other nations need to [enact corresponding legislation and regulations](#) on a multilateral basis.
4. **Strategic Balancing.** The United States has strategic interests in working with nations that are not always aligned with American values. Forging coalitions against authoritarian adversaries such as Iran and China will require working with non-democratic partners. An effective strategy to pressure Iran calls for collaboration with Saudi Arabia, just as an effective U.S.-led coalition to countervail China includes Vietnam. Engagement with autocracies that share American interests in balancing the worst human rights abusers is more likely to achieve results than treating them as pariahs, which can push them into our enemies' arms. Rather than zigzagging from harsh public criticism on human rights to entreaties for strategic cooperation, the next administration should pursue a consistent policy to advance enduring U.S. interests while making clear to partners that protecting the rights of their citizens will strengthen the quality of their security ties with America and distinguish them from our shared authoritarian adversaries.

This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership's [Freedom and Democracy Working Group](#).

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