

CHINA BALANCE SHEET

HUMAN RIGHTS & RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The direction that China and U.S.-China relations take will define the world's future. For the United States, a rising China increasingly affects American prosperity and security, calling for some clear-eyed thinking and tough economic, political, and security choices. As the twenty-first century unfurls, the stakes have never been higher for getting U.S. policy toward China right. By untangling the complex, sometimes contradictory, strands of this vast and dynamic country, *China: The Balance Sheet* lays the foundation for informed and effective U.S. policy toward China, the world's emerging superpower.

BACKGROUND

- China's record on human rights and religious freedom is rightly open to criticism, both from within China and from the international community. **Amnesty International reports that “tens of thousands of people continued to be detained or imprisoned in violation of their fundamental human rights” in 2006.**
- In December 2005, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture concluded a visit and found that **“the practice of torture, though on the decline – particularly in urban areas– remains widespread in China.”**
- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2006 annual report found that **the government “continues to engage in systematic and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief”** and that “prominent religious leaders and laypersons alike continue to be confined, tortured, ‘disappeared,’ imprisoned and/or subjected to other forms of ill treatment on account of their religion or belief.”
- **As many as 135 Tibetans, two-thirds of whom are monks or nuns, are reportedly imprisoned on political grounds.** In the Xinjiang region, especially since the late 1990s, Beijing has likewise put down Islamic religious activities linked to separatism, which has had a chilling effect on religious expression.

CURRENT SITUATION

- The outlook for human rights in China is currently uncertain. Some important progress is evident: **Beijing no longer simply dismisses international norms and concerns, but feels compelled to respond to them.** Permitting the visit of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture in 2005 – albeit after some ten years of negotiation – was a step in the right direction.

For further information, see Chapter 3:

“China's Domestic Transformation: Democratization or Disorder?”

China: The Balance Sheet: What the World Needs to Know Now about the Emerging Superpower

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- **China has ratified the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and signed, but not yet ratified, the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.** In December 2005, despite rejecting the findings of the United Nations Human Rights rapporteur on torture, China “expressed willingness to work with him and the United Nations on future visits.”
- **The U.S. State Department notes that China’s modernization has “improved dramatically the lives of hundreds of millions of Chinese, increased social mobility, and expanded the scope of personal freedom.** This has meant substantially greater freedom of travel, employment opportunities, educational and cultural pursuits, job and housing choices, and access to information.”
- **China has also agreed to discuss human rights as part of the ongoing “senior leaders dialogue” with the United States** and carries out a formal human rights dialogue with the European Union.
- **There are an estimated 70 million practicing Christians in China today.** Approximately 8 percent of the Chinese population is Buddhist, and 1.5 percent is Muslim. There are also several hundred thousand Taoists and hundreds of millions of Chinese who engage in traditional folk religions. There are thought to be hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners across China.
- **Notwithstanding, nearly all outside observers have found that in spite of improvements in some areas, there has been general backsliding in China for human rights and religious freedom under the new Hu-Wen leadership.** The Party continues to crackdown on civil, particularly religious, groups that may generate political loyalties to persons or authorities beyond its control.

The Freedom House survey for 2005 ranks China at 6.5 on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 designating the least free countries in the world. Human Rights Watch 2005 concludes that China “remains a highly repressive state.” Amnesty International and the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China effectively echo these findings.

IMPLICATIONS

- **The human rights situation in China presents a mixed picture.** Whether the current backsliding is another example of the tightening and loosening that has traditionally characterized the Party’s approach to human rights and religious freedom or whether it is a sign of a fundamental shift in policy needs to be closely monitored.
- **Pressing Beijing for improvements in its human rights record should be an indispensable part of U.S. China policy.** At the same time, such efforts should be accompanied by informed and realistic expectations.