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China must release Liu Xiaobo – or lose its credibility

We no longer live in a unipolar world. Western nations do not enjoy a monopoly on economic and political power. This is an encouraging shift and one that is bringing greater equality and prosperity to the world. With this progress, developing countries are increasingly influential and, in this regard, China reigns supreme. While China's economic and geopolitical progress over the past three decades is cause for celebration, its support for abusive regimes and the brutal force with which it crushes dissent within its own borders demonstrates that substantial reform is needed if China is to be viewed within the international community as a true leader.

In short, the world must strenuously object to the Chinese model for development which decouples economic and political reform by unapologetically asserting that anything, including domestic and international oppression, can be justified if it is viewed to enable economic growth.

International scrutiny of the Chinese government's widespread violation of fundamental rights at home and abroad is not meddling in its "internal affairs"; it flows from its legal commitments to respect the inherent dignity and equality of every person.

Though he is just one of 1.3 billion, the story of this year's Nobel peace prize laureate, Dr Liu Xiaobo, is sadly emblematic of the Chinese government's intolerance to individual expression.

Dr Liu, a former literature professor, first found himself on the sharp end of the government's policies after negotiating the peaceful retreat of student protesters from Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989.

One year ago, the government sentenced him to 11 years in prison for co-authoring Charter 08, a call for peaceful political reform in China, eventually signed by 10,000 Chinese citizens before the government removed it from the internet in China.

On 8 October, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded Dr Liu its peace prize in recognition of his "long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China". Like its response to Charter 08, the Chinese government's reaction to the Committee's announcement demonstrates its extreme sensitivity to criticism and the lengths it is prepared to go to prevent it, both inside and outside China.

Most alarming, the government detained Dr Liu's wife, Liu Xia, in her Beijing home an hour after the announcement of the prize. She has been isolated from the outside world and is being held under house arrest, without charge, trial and conviction, let alone any legal justification.

Others throughout the country, who have associated with Dr Liu or are suspected of sharing his vision for China, are harassed, interrogated and detained.

The Chinese government is also flexing its muscles internationally. Before the announcement, China tried to intimidate Nobel officials in Oslo. In the wake of the Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision, China responded by calling the award a "blasphemy" and threatening relations with Norway.

It has since postponed negotiations with Norway on a free-trade agreement. As the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony approaches, it has warned other nations to boycott the events or ominously "face the consequences".

China doesn't just violate the human rights of its citizens, it coddles and supports brutal dictatorships around the world. The authoritarian regimes in Burma, Sudan and North Korea, whose actions continue to threaten international peace and security, remain free to commit mass atrocities against its peoples because of bilateral support and billions of dollars of weapons supplied by Beijing.

The Chinese government's willingness to assert itself internationally shows its increasing confidence on the world stage, but its extreme sensitivity to criticism demonstrates its lack of confidence domestically.

This lack of confidence ultimately only serves to further undermine the credibility of the government among its people.

China now has the unique opportunity to chart a new course, one that appropriately claims the mantle of being a world leader in every respect, including an embrace of its obligations to promote and protect of human rights. But such an approach must begin by China respecting its obligations under its constitution and international agreements.

The first step must be the unconditional release of Liu Xiaobo and his wife, Liu Xia, before the Nobel peace prize award ceremony on Friday.

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