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Comment: The Need for Pragmatism

by Jeffrey E. Garten

I agree with Aryeh Neier that improving the global environment for human rights ought to be a prominent goal of American foreign policy. Where we differ is on *how* to achieve that goal. The link between human rights and foreign policy will become an even bigger issue in the future than it is now. In my view, the most important international development in the next decade will be the entrance of several countries onto the center stage of global affairs. These countries include Argentina, Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey—the “big emerging markets.” As these countries integrate with the greater global systems, they will change the face of trade and finance, play critical roles in America’s calculus of war and peace, and tip the balance when it comes to environmental protection and the prevention of illegal drug trafficking. And most of them have a long way to go before meeting the human rights standards that Americans hold dear.

Neier asserts that in its relations with big emerging markets, as well as with some other countries that have important strategic or economic value, Washington has subordinated human rights concerns to trade and security objectives. He wants to pursue human rights in-

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dependent of other foreign policy considerations. The human rights movement, he says, must advocate the idea that "the promotion of human rights should not be weighed against competing concerns; it should proceed wherever gross abuses are practiced."

I have no argument with the notion that we should try to advance human rights everywhere, even with countries of great strategic and economic importance to America. Nor do I disagree that the United States is often inconsistent—even hypocritical—in its approach, pressuring small countries much more than many of the more powerful ones. But Neier appears to go even further by suggesting that the method of promoting human rights must be highly visible and uncompromising. He seems to be implying that there is a need for constant public condemnation by Washington officials as well as more threats and the use of economic sanctions. If that is the case, then he is proposing a self-defeating policy: It might occasionally result in the release of a few high-profile prisoners and make a number of Americans feel good that we are being proactive, but it would create a backlash in the very countries whose policies the United States is trying to change, and it would undermine the long-term progress that Americans want. U.S. behavior of this kind will not work vis-à-vis big emerging markets, which are increasingly powerful, nationalistic, and resistant to unilateral American pressure.

I also differ with Neier over his implicit definition of what a human rights policy ought to encompass. Of course we should be outraged over torture, imprisonment without due process, and other egregious abuses of people. But U.S. human rights goals should also include the general political and economic progress of other countries, progress that will eventually help people to become freer to express their opinions, to influence the policies of their governments, and to achieve higher standards of living—with all the personal liberation that such progress entails. Neier implies that the evolution of democratic capitalism does not have much to do with the protection of human rights. He is ignoring the recent history of South Korea, Taiwan, and several other nations in Asia and Latin America where the combination of democratic momentum and the opening of markets has led to substantial improvements in the human rights climate. He is also giving short shrift to the history of American society, which has become much more humane as it has evolved. It was not so long ago that blacks were lynched in the United States, while gov-

ernmental authorities turned their heads.

America ought to pursue an aggressive human rights policy that is based on the following tenets:

- *The policy should be an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, not independent of it.* At exactly the time that America needs great flexibility to deal with tumultuous change all over the world, congressional mandates that bind the president's hands with regard to sanctions of all kinds are already impairing U.S. influence abroad. By advocating that human rights policy should be divorced from other areas of foreign policy, Neier is saying that diplomacy does not matter. He is giving up the tools of negotiation and persuasion. Rather than strengthening U.S. human rights policy, he would limit our means of influencing the human rights situation abroad, which so often requires subtlety and sensitivity.
- *The criteria for promoting human rights ought to be not what salves our consciences, but rather what works.* That goal translates into pressing for improvements in the human rights environment not with megaphones but with behind-the-scenes diplomacy, so that foreign governments are not backed into a corner and forced to oppose what the United States is trying to do. It also means working more closely with big emerging markets to help them deal with one of their crucial problems—the absence of local institutions that can monitor and enforce human rights policies. The United States should be helping with all aspects of developing the rule of law—educating judges, helping to set up effectively functioning court systems, and training police forces to perform basic monitoring and law enforcement. No one should underestimate the magnitude of this task, particularly in societies where all forms of corruption run deep: The strengthening of such institutions is essential to protecting human rights.
- *While we should not shrink from making American views about human rights known to other governments, the United States should also not link human rights to trade, as it once did in threatening to withhold most-favored-nation trading status from China.* In fact, unless one takes an exceedingly narrow view of what human rights are all about, then expanding U.S. commercial interactions with big emerging markets and other countries will promote the cause. Neier should not be so quick to dismiss this argument. Would he deny that Chinese citizens who have benefited from expanded

commercial contact with the rest of the world have had their lives transformed for the better? Would he deny that American firms in India that provide electricity to schools and hospitals for the first time are improving people's lives? Would he say that American companies that set up modern telecommunications systems to give Indonesian citizens access to phones, faxes, and the Internet are not putting them on the path to greater freedom? Would he claim that American companies in Brazil, whose operations set high standards when it comes to health and safety in the workplace, have no impact on human rights?

- *If there have to be high-profile protests or sanctions, they should be multilateral efforts.* Neier tips his hat to the need to get the cooperation of other countries when punitive measures are deemed necessary. He recognizes that U.S. companies are put at a competitive disadvantage when Washington criticizes a foreign government's human rights policies while Bonn, Paris, and Tokyo say nothing and simultaneously push commercial projects for their firms. "It is incumbent on the [human rights] movement to generate pressure on other governments to speak out," he writes. But he underestimates and oversimplifies the nature of the task. Take the Europeans; they do not subscribe to American-style breast-beating, so getting their cooperation will be excruciatingly difficult. And the world is no longer divided between north and south, such that only rich countries call the shots. Today, effective multilateral cooperation requires getting the governments of several big emerging markets to participate in the definition of the problem and to help enforce the solution, too. The magnitude of the challenge is even greater than getting the Europeans on board.

America should never abandon the values that have made it a great nation, strong and humane. But if Americans really care about the lives of people beyond their shores, then they need a carefully considered strategy, one that reflects the world as it evolves and makes use of the entire U.S. foreign policy apparatus. Neier's approach will not suffice.