Shaping the new world order: The battle for human rights

By James M. Dorsey

When it comes to the crackdown in Xinjiang, the question is whether it is the dog wagging the tail or the tail wagging the dog. Or in other words, is China leading the charge to undermine accepted concepts of human rights, including freedom of religion, as well as accountability and justice as a result of criticism of the crackdown or are the crackdown, the accelerated rollout of a 21st century Orwellian surveillance state, and the export of some of its key elements expressions of a broader more fundamental desire to redefine human rights?

On balance, it seems to be the latter, given that the redefinition strokes with already challenged long-standing Chinese foreign and defense policy principles such as non-interference in the internal affairs of others and an economics-driven allegedly win-win proposition.

The Chinese effort goes to the core of the struggle to shape a new world. It is a struggle that is as much about power and spheres of influence as it is about values such as human rights, accountability and justice that would undergird the new world order.

The Chinese effort to shape those values in its mould is multipronged. It ranges from the total disregard of accepted norms as is evident in Xinjiang -- which constitutes an almost unprecedented attempt to rewrite, at least in practice the norms of a faith -- to support of often arbitrary autocracy and authoritarianism to proposals to alter the principles on which institutions like the United Nations Human Rights Council operate in ways that would enable repressive regimes.

To be fair, China is not the only country that would like a globally accepted approach towards basic rights to be altered to the detriment of human rights. Muslim nations, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, have, for example, long sought to have blasphemy criminalized.

China is waging its campaign at a crucial juncture of history. It benefits from the rise of ethno- and religious nationalism, populism, intolerance and widespread anti-migration sentiment - sentiments that are as prevalent in China as they are elsewhere across the globe.

The campaign is enabled by the emergence of presidents like Donald J. Trump in the United States, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hungary's Victor Orban and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who have either deemphasized human rights or gone as far as justifying abuses in addition to seeking to limit, if not undermine, independent media that hold them accountable.

Within the context of the struggle to shape a new world order, China and the West's diametrically opposed concepts of human rights involve a battle for dominance over the future of technology and global influence.

Freedom House, a Washington-based freedom watchdog, reported last year that China was exporting to at least 18 countries sophisticated surveillance systems capable of identifying threats to public order and systems to another 36 that make it easier to repress free speech. It amounts to a passing on of Chinese norms for how technology should govern society, the most extreme example of which is Xinjiang.

The timing of the Chinese effort is significant because it comes at a moment that predictions of the death of popular protest, symbolized by the defeat of the initially successful 2011 popular Arab revolts, are being called into question.

As we speak, mass anti-government demonstrations in Sudan demand the resignation of President Omar al-Bashir. Anti-Chinese groups march in Kyrgyzstan while protests in Zimbabwe decry repression, poor public services, high unemployment, widespread corruption and delays in civil servants receiving their salaries. The past year has also seen widespread anti-government agitation in countries like Morocco, Jordan and Haiti.

The protests and what Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth describes as "a resistance that keeps winning battles" suggests that China's campaign may have won battles but has yet to win the war.

One of those battles is China's success last year in pushing a non-binding resolution in the Human Rights Council that effectively amounts to the beginning of a process that would wither away the UN human rights eco system.

In a sign of the times, the resolution garnered significant support. The United States, in a twist of irony, was the only Council member to vote against it with countries like Germany and Australia abstaining.

The resolution in the words of Human Rights Watch China director Sophie Richardson "gutted the ideas of accountability for actual human rights violations, suggesting 'dialogue' instead. It failed to specify any course of action when rights violators refuse to cooperate with UN experts, retaliate against rights defenders or actively reject human rights principles. And it even failed to acknowledge any role for the council itself to address serious human rights violations when 'dialogue' and 'cooperation' don't produce results."

Ms. Richardson warned that "if these ideas become not just prevailing norms but also actual operating principles for the Council, victims of state-sponsored abuses worldwide—including in Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—will face almost impossible odds in holding abusive governments accountable."

China effectively wants inter-governmental cooperation instead of accountability, government officials discussing among themselves with no discussion of accountability for abuses and no participation of independent groups. The question is what China's next step will be, whether it will more aggressively try to change the council's mandate, nibble away at language in treaties, or roll back the role of civil society.

China's efforts are both an attempt to rewrite international norms and counter sharp Western criticism of its moves against Christians and Muslim and its crackdown in Xinjiang.

Against that backdrop, it remains to be seen whether Turkey's recent condemnation of the crackdown in Xinjiang marks a watershed. Granted, Turkey is no banner carrier for human rights and on many counts supports China's approach. Yet, the condemnation constitutes the first major crack in the Muslim wall of silence that has enabled the Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang. The condemnation's significance goes beyond developments in Xinjiang.

Like with Muslim condemnation of Mr. Trump's decision last year to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Turkey appears to be wanting to be seen as a spokesman of the Muslim world in its one-upmanship with Saudi Arabia and to a lesser degree Iran. While neither the kingdom or Iran are likely to follow Turkey's example any time soon, the condemnation raises the stakes and puts other contenders for leadership on the defensive.

The bulk of the Muslim world has remained conspicuously silent with only Malaysian leaders willing to speak out and set an example by last year rejecting Chinese demands that a group of Uighur asylum seekers be extradited to China. Malaysia instead allowed the group to go to Turkey.

Interestingly, the Turkish condemnation came days after four Islamist members of the Kuwaiti parliament organized the Arab world's first public protest against the crackdown.

The Turkish condemnation could have its most immediate impact in Central Asia, which like Turkey has close ethnic and cultural ties to Xinjiang and is struggling to balance relations with China with the need to be seen to be standing up for the rights of its citizens and ethnic kin.

In Kazakhstan, Turkey's newly found assertiveness towards China could make it more difficult for the government to return to the People's Republic Sayragul Sautbay, a Chinese national of ethnic Kazakh descent and a former re-education camp employee, who fled illegally to Kazakhstan to join her husband and child.

Ms. Sautbay, who stood trial in Kazakhstan last year for illegal entry, is the only camp instructor to have worked in a re-education camp in Xinjiang teaching inmates Mandarin and Communist Party ideology and spoken publicly about it.

She has twice been refused asylum in Kazakhstan and is appealing the decision. China is believed to be demanding that she be handed back to the Xinjiang authorities.

Similarly, Turkey's condemnation could impact the fate of Qalymbek Shahman, a Chinese businessman of Kazakh descent, whose whereabouts are unknown. He was last reported as being held at the airport in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent after being denied entry into Kazakhstan.

Mr. Shahman said in a video clip from Tashkent airport that he had left Xinjiang because he no longer could deal with having his identity checked every 50 to 100 meters. A guide for foreign businessmen, Mr. Shahman said he was put out of business by the continued checks that raised questions in the minds of his clients and persuaded local businessmen not to work with him.

The fact that China is to some degree susceptible to pressure is evident in the fact that it recently agreed, in a bid to pacify criticism of its Xinjiang policy, to allow some 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to renounce their Chinese citizenship and leave the country.

The decision followed Ms. Sautbay's testimony in a Kazakh court that she had worked in a camp where 2,500 Kazakhs were being held and that she was aware of two more such camps where some 5,000 other Kazakhs were detained. Her revelations sparked sharp criticism in parliament and on social media.

At the bottom line, China's assault on human rights as well as concepts of accountability and justice fits a larger long-standing pattern of Chinese support for autocracy and authoritarianism that is packaged in the language of noble principles but in effect is no different from US policy, particularly in the Middle East. It's a policy for which the United States has paid dearly and with the undercurrents of change sweeping the Middle East and North Africa and rising anti-Chinese sentiment in Eurasia, could ultimately come to haunt China.

Already, one of China's most immediate problems is a growing perception that its principle of win-win economic cooperation often amounts to little more than China wins twice, both economically and geopolitically. It is forcing China to focus in the short-term less on the Great Game—the rivalry with the United States and its allies for dominance in a swath of land stretching from the China Sea to Europe's Atlantic coast—and more on ensuring that it does not lose hard-won ground.

The hollowing out of norms underlying concepts of human rights, accountability and justice reflects an often broader absence of globally accepted standards in China's approach to the Belt and Road.

That is, for example, evident in China's support for the kind of dirty-power projects in Central and South Asia and Africa, which the People's Republic has banned at home because of the increased cost of carbon pricing and air pollution regulations associated with coal-fired power plants. Climate change scientists warn that those projects could significantly heighten the risk of climate change.

President Xi Jinping has capitalized on the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement—the landmark United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change —by projecting China as a leader in environmental good governance.

In 2016, Mr. Xi called for a "green, healthy, intelligent, and peaceful" Belt and Road. He urged participating countries to "deepen cooperation in environmental protection, intensify ecological preservation and build a green Silk Road."

On paper, Chinese environmental good governance looks good. The problem is that the government's guidelines are non-binding and often ignored.

As a result, Mr. Xi has yet to back up words with deeds. China is developing some 240 coal projects with a total generating capacity of 251 gigawatts in 25 countries that include developments in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya, Ghana, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, and is also funding new coal capacity in Egypt, Tanzania, and Zambia. Many of those projects do not incorporate carbon capture technology that would align them with global efforts to control climate change.

Whether its human rights or environmental standards, the fundamental issue are the norms that shape the world we live in. Human rights are often relegated to the backbench with geopolitics and economics being the bigger fish to fry. Yet, they constitute a key pillar and battleground in determining what a future Eurasian world will look like.

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. James is *the author of* The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer *blog, a* book *with the same title and a co-authored volume,* Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa as well as Shifting Sands, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa and recently published China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom